

they made me a killer

I killed a man when I was seven years old.
Killed a man who was trying to murder my mother.
He was choking her to death.
And I shot that man with his own gun.
Without hesitation I shot him in the head with a .22.
My mother was a whore. That man was one of her customers.
We were in North Carolina then.
We left his body on the floor of our apartment and fled to the
Greyhound bus station.
We left Charlotte and traveled north. Ran like we were wanted
by the FBI.
I remember that day like it was this morning. I remember the
smells.
We sat in the back of the bus with the rest of the poor, the scent
of old people, poverty, and greasy fried chicken in the air. Everyone
was eating. Everyone but us. My mother looked at me, heard my
stomach growling, then humbled herself, went and asked some old
people if she could have some chicken. For me. She asked them to
please give her some for me.
Those old people gave her half a bucket of homemade chicken.
Biscuits. Corn on the cob. I ate that cold and greasy food like I had
never had a decent meal before in my life.
Day turned into night turned into day.
We rode buses north and didn't stop running until we made it to
the bilingual and bicultural land of the festivals. Jazz. Comedy. Reggae.
We ran until we got to Canada.
Got off the bus in Montreal.
Montreal was a pothole- filled city that had four seasons: winter,
still- winter, construction season, and almost- winter. We'd fled Charlotte
and stopped running on an island that some said was shaped
like a bikini, but to me it was shaped like the bottom part of a
woman, from her waist to knees. Montreal was shaped like a woman
on her back with her legs wide- open.
We had stopped running near the crack of that Frenchwoman's
ass.
The crack of that Canadian ass was right off Autoroute 720.
We had missed still- winter and landed there during the construction
season, hid out in a province that enforced Bill 101 to ensure
signs were in French, and if someone dared to post a sign using
both French and English, the French part had to be *twice* the size of
the English.
I was scared.
Not because I had killed a man.
I'd never been away from Charlotte.
I was scared because we were in place I'd never seen before. A
place I'd never heard of.
And the money was running low. We'd eaten the last of our fried
chicken yesterday.
We were homeless. And hungry. Had given up everything. Because
I had killed that man. Because I had killed the evil man who
was trying to choke my mother to death.
Now we were strangers in a foreign country, walking the streets
with the damned.

Montreal was bizarre to me. The music. The language. The people.

Not to my mother.

People spoke French to her and she talked back to them in French. Sometimes she spoke English while they spoke French, or she spoke French while they spoke English.

But when she spoke French, her mannerisms and accent became the same as theirs.

Her accent had never fit in the South. People always said she had never sounded like the natives of Charlotte. Some made fun of her exotic tongue. She was my mother. To me she had always sounded smarter, more refined, like she was a queen who had traveled the world.

While we ate stale bread, cold meat, and wilted vegetables, we overheard the homeless people that slept in the parks and doorways on Sainte- Catherine East laughing about those *important* Bill 101 issues, issues that infuriated the rich and powerful. Rich people lived at the other end, Sainte- Catherine West, where the shops were nice and clean, and the sex shops looked more respectable. Compared to the east side, Sainte- Catherine West was heaven.

We were homeless and living in a piss- smelling hell for a few days. I was terrified, afraid of the new language, afraid to talk to people, so that left me friendless too. Despite living in the parks and resting on McGill's lawn, despite all the peep shows and sex shops that lined the area, I pretended we were camping. Camping with that .22 tucked in my belongings.

I asked, "Why did we come here?"

"I grew up here."

"Are we French? We're from Canada? So we're French?"

She pulled her lips in, lowered her voice. "My mother came here from a small town right outside of Paris when she was a child. She was from Yerres, France. Left there, went to Paris for a while, worked, saved her money, came here alone. Will tell you all about her one day."

"So we are French."

"My father died . . . and Mother . . . her new husband . . . I had to leave. She took his word over mine. I was young. And I had to leave. Had to get out in the world and make it on my own."

"He was mean to you?"

"He did things he should not have done. Same for another family member."

"What did they do?"

"Not now. One day. We'll talk about those horrible things one day. I told Margaret about all the bad things that happened to me. She was the only one I ever told. And I will tell you one day."

"Who is Margaret?"

"My best friend. My best friend in the whole wide world."

"Where is she now?"

"Heaven."

She wiped her eyes, created a smile. "You're starting to smell. Need to get you into a toilet and wash you down. Maybe we can sneak you into one in one of the malls."

"When are we going to get a house?"

"I've always wanted a house. Mama doesn't have the money.

We'll get an apartment."

"When?"

"Working on a place to stay now. But I want to make sure that no one is looking for us before I get us a place. And I have to find a way to get a place to live without using my name."

My words put stress lines in her face. Saw the fear and pressure she was masking even when she smiled. What she had told me, I didn't understand all of that, but I nodded.

A man came over to her. He was monstrously large, looked like he weighed tons.

"*Suces- moi?*"

"*Oui.* For fifty."

She tucked the .22 inside my jacket, told me to wait where I was. Nervous, I stood up. A stranger in a strange land. A child in an adult's world.

She snapped at me, said, "Don't be afraid. Be a man. Don't be afraid."

She kissed my face and smiled at me.

I sat back down. My hands shaking.

She left with that huge man. A man the size of a basking shark. I hated the way I felt. The sensation of being powerless. The sensation of being alone.

Seemed like she was gone two years, but she came back thirty minutes later.

I ran to her.

She handed me an ice cream cone. Vanilla. Hers was praline pecan.

I asked, "What does *suces- moi* mean?"

Her shoulders weakened. She frowned and walked away.

She said, "That is not the French you need to learn."

"What French do I need to learn?"

"I will teach you. The things you just said, never repeat them.

Never."

We gathered our things.

I followed her, vanilla ice cream dripping down over my fingers.

We passed other people living in the streets. One man had a family of dogs with him, him and his cardboard and his mutts living in a small parklike area. We walked until we passed by a metro station, then came up on a larger park. We squatted there with the other squatters.

She said, "I hate having to do this, having to hide with the bums. But I love you and I don't want them to find out what happened. They'd ask a lot of questions. And they'd take you away from me. You are all I have. All I love. My best friend is dead. She's been dead for a long time. You are all I have. You are all I love. Would you want them to take you away from me?"

I shook my head. Part of me wanted to shed tears. But men didn't cry.

She said, "I'll find us a decent place, a room with four walls and a bathtub."

She had to have enough cash. Credit cards left an electronic trail. It wasn't the cash that slowed her down. She needed fake ID.

She had to start all over with a new identity.

Another man came up. "*Suces- moi?*"

"*Oui.* For fifty."

"Forty. I'm a college student."

"Fifty."

He turned to walk away.

"Wait. College boy."

"Forty."

"*Oui*. This time. Forty for the handsome college boy."

She left with him, licking her praline pecan.

Gun hidden, our possessions at my feet, I sat down and finished my ice cream cone.

Two weeks later she found us a room.

That hostel was on the edges of downtown at Sherbrooke and Jeanne- Mance. We were about three blocks from Sainte- Catherine, on the line that divided the moneyed areas from the red- light district. We lived on the border of her dreams and her reality.

It was nice at first. It was normal.

As normal as life could be for people like us.

During the day, when the weather was nice, we walked René- Lévesque and took the side streets toward the cobblestone roads in Old Montreal, went by the waters. On weekends my mother took me to see the basilica, or we went to the observation area in Parc du Mont- Royal, watched the Rollerbladers. We blended with the crowd and watched all the street performers, one dressed like a golden Elvis, others doing henna, took all of that in while I ate ice cream and she sipped on coffee she'd bought at Second Cup.

That was August. Temperature about twenty- five Celsius. Some days we just sat on a stoop watching people get on and off the bus. I had comic books that she bought from Librairie Astro. Spider- Man. Punisher. Batman. She had a stack of paperback books that she bought from the same bookstore. Romance books. She always read romance books. She always had a cheap cigarette case in hand, smoking du Mauriers down to the filter, then flipping those filters out on the pavement. We'd been there a few weeks. Long enough to get comfortable.

As she read her book, she puffed her cigarette and said, "*Dimanche. Lundi. Mardi.*"

I read my comic and repeated, "*Dimanche. Lundi. Mardi.*"

"*Mercredi. Jeudi. Vendredi. Samedi.*"

I repeated, "*Mercredi. Jeudi. Vendredi. Samedi.*"

"Those are the days of the week. We'll work on the months tomorrow."

"How do you know all of these languages?"

"Been on the move most of my life. Never really had a home, I guess."

She inhaled, wiped tears from her eyes, then created a broad smile.

"We have to find you a new name."

"Jean- Claude. I like Jean- Claude."

"I like Jean- Claude too. Who should I be?"

"Catherine. Like the street we were on."

"Okay, Jean- Claude. My name is Catherine."

She smiled, leaned over, and kissed me on my lips.

An African man stopped in front of the stoop.

"*Tu suces sans capote?*"

"If you have a place, it can be arranged."

"How much?"

"*Pour cinquantes piasses.*"

She left with that man, went across the street, vanished inside a worn hotel.

I sat there repeating, "*Dimanche. Lundi. Mardi. Mercredi. Jeudi. Vendredi. Samedi.*"

We bounced from our hostel to renting a small room at Hotel Du

Fort.

Not long after that, the money was better and we slowed down, moved into L'Appartement, a hotel- apartment in the same area of Montreal, at the crack of that Frenchwoman's ass, still walking distance to Sainte- Catherine East. She called that strip her job.

Never said what she did down there, only that every evening she had to go to work.

She'd hit the east side of Sainte- Catherine, compete with the working gay men and Frenchwomen, wearing out her high heels and chain- smoking, being one of the last to leave the *rue* before she came back to our cheap hotel room and woke me up, that weary smile on her face, dead on her feet and smelling like colognes if it had been a good night, sometimes strange perfumes if it had been a desperate night, frowning and smelling like no one but herself and her own sweat if it had been a wasted night, either way grinning and shaking me to wake me up.

"Rise and shine, Jean- Claude. Mommy will make you breakfast."

As I sat on the floor eating a hot breakfast, television on, she drank coffee and smoked.

I asked, "Why do the people up here make that funny sound all the time?"

"What funny sound?"

"*Eh*. They always say *eh*."

"You have to say it at the end of a sentence to make it work. You use it to ask a question or to affirm a position. Like, it's freaking cold outside, *eh*? You don't care, *eh*?"

"*Eh*. Bee. Cee. Dee."

She laughed. "On Saturday, want to go to the Parisien and see a movie?"

"Can we go to the underground city and ride the metro too?"

"*Eh*."

"Bee. Cee. Dee."

She laughed. "We can ride the metro from one end to the other if you like."

Days later she bought me a heavy coat. That meant we'd be there for the winter.

That coat meant stability.

We would settle into that Canadian life. I became Jean- Claude.

I would go to Westmount Park Elementary. I'd get to spend more weekends up at the park learning to skate.

Jean- Claude. I'd stand in the mirror and practice my name. *Jean- Claude*.

I was going to become French- Canadian.

The man called Midnight was gone out of our lives and we were no longer on the run.

Then came the darkness.

My mother came home one night, mouth bloodied, screaming my name.

I jumped to my feet and ran to her when she came in the door.

Another man had beat her up.

I asked where this evil man was.

He was down at Avenue du Président- Kennedy and City Councillors.

He'd beat her, left the hotel, and gone to Biddle's, a small jazz club sandwiched between two huge businesses, Croix Bleue and Roche- Bobois. She knew where he was because she had followed him there.

I tucked the .22 inside the right pocket of my brand- new winter

coat.

I followed her out into the streets.

We hid out on Président- Kennedy, waited across the street from Biddle's.

The big man crossed the street, his inebriated stagger taking him west, toward the section of Sainte- Catherine that had the nicest strip clubs. Gun in hand, I walked behind him. Went after the evil man who had wounded my mother.

He passed Café Suprême, then paused when he saw my mother at the next corner.

He yelled, "*Putain de merde. Salope. Plote. Sale pute.*"

She yelled back, "Give me my money."

"You and your tricks. Get away before I have you arrested."

"You came. You owe me for my work. And for what you did to my face."

"Your nasty pussy bloodied my loins. Consider us even."

"Last time. Pay me. Or else."

"Or else?" He laughed. "Out of my way, cunt. Out of my way or I will beat you again."

She stood there, frowning. "Just give me what you owe me.

That's all. Don't rob me."

"I'll give you what you deserve. And you deserve a good beating."

He walked toward her, his fists doubled.

I caught up with him and, as I passed him, raised my gun and squeezed the trigger. The soft pop of a .22, then the bullet entered his head and rattled around his skull. He crumpled where he stood. My mother ran to him, fished his wallet of his pocket, took all of the money out, wiped the wallet down, then walked away, hurried up Union, and I followed her back home, both of us moving with speed and silence. We said nothing about what we'd just done.

She took to the edge of the worn bed, sat there pulling her hair, rocking and crying.

The cash from the dead man's wallet was spread on the tattered bedspread.

I was in the bathroom, losing a battle with nausea.

She came and stood over me, sweating, breathing hard, her face swollen.

She said, "It's okay."

Mama got in the bed, clothes on. I did the same. Neither of us slept.

The morning news talked about a man named Ian Lafreniere being gunned down.

He was from Toronto.

My mother said, "Toronto. No love lost."

Then the news said he was a police officer. Married. With three children.

Not a normal john. Not someone who would have been low priority.

My mother shivered, talked to herself, and packed as fast as she could.

I knew the routine. I rushed, packed what I wanted to take, which never was much.

Hours later we were on the run.

She said, "Give me the gun. Give it to me before we end up incarcerated at Bordeaux."

She took all the bullets out, wiped the gun down, pulled filthy

trash back, pushed that gun into the bottom of the garbage can, covered it up, then put the bullets in a different garbage can.

I asked, "Where are we going?"

"We'll have to sneak through Toronto, slip into New York, find our way south from there."

That nausea rose again, made me sweat, but didn't take over.

I said, "My daddy."

"What about your daddy?"

"Tell me about my daddy again."

"Not now."

"Please?"

She took a deep breath, rocked and closed her eyes. "Your daddy . . . met him in Montego Bay . . . he was an army man. Jumped out of planes. Took sniper training, made Delta Force."

"Where is he now?"

"He's . . . he's in South America. He's down there fighting for his country."

"Can we go there?"

"No. We can't go there."

"You said my daddy was strong."

"He was strong, used to fight bulls bare-handed, beat them every time."

I wanted to be like my daddy, the mercenary who fought bulls with his bare hands.

She said, "It's time I explained to you what I do. You're old enough to know."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"People say things."

"What do I do?"

"*Pute.*"

She struck me hard enough to split my lip. Then she struck me over and over.

Pute meant "whore."

Then she cried and reached for me. I pulled away from her. Over and over she apologized. But that first wicked blow changed everything. On that road to perdition, I tasted my own blood.

From the hand of a woman I had killed for.

What was between us unraveled.

I had protected her. I had killed for her. And she had attacked me in return.

Love turned upside down and hate took root.

That hatred never left.

Would never leave.

Thousands of sunrises and sunsets had gone by since that last day in Montreal.

She had trained me to be a killer and in the end she had stolen from me. She had abused me, did things to me a mother should never do to her son.

The pain remained, as forever as the Appalachians.

And that hate was still there, spreading across those mountains like kudzu.

Hate had blackened the part of my heart that once burned with unconditional love for her.

Jean- Claude no longer existed.

I'd had many names since being Jean- Claude.

Now my name was Gideon.
I was a long way from Montreal.
I was on the other side of the Atlantic holed up in a hotel in central London.
And I was afraid. I'd killed a man in Tampa. Had killed a man and most of his associates. Had increased my income by over six figures honoring that contract.
And I knew that brutal death would not go unpunished.
It wasn't confirmed, but I had been followed.
That told me that there might be a contract out on me.
Revenge knew no bounds.
The hunter had now become the hunted.
I had become one of them.
The people I went to see, when I was the last face they saw.
So I was afraid. There was nothing wrong with fear.
So long as that fear was controlled.
But it was undeniable, the way it was bubbling beneath the surface.
I was on edge because I had been stalked for the last day.
Afraid because death was at my hotel room, lurking on the other side of my door.