

Marie Laberge

JULY

A novel

Translated by Cara Gargano

ÉDITIONS MARTHA

1

The exulting birds had already waked him, just before dawn, grey tones tinged with rose, heavy upon the night. He had spent the night fighting the desire to get up, waking up in starts and worrying that he had overslept, if it was already past time.

Now, the sun was taking the room by storm. A long, luminous rectangle on the floor, shining like honey, it was just reaching the little oasis of the persian rug next to his bed.

“When it reaches the mauve curve of the bird in the center, then I’ll get up,” Simon told himself.

It was still far too early and he knew it. He didn’t even need to check the alarm clock. Too early, said the enthusiastic song of the blue jays emptying the birdfeeder under the window; too early, said the yellow sun still smeared with red, languishing on the ground; too early, for sure. He hadn’t been this excited in a long time. Not since the day of his marriage, in fact. That year (God, how long ago!) he’d had his share of strong emotions: his doctorate and final exams, as well as his marriage to Charlotte.

Since then, everything seemed to him to have been calm, almost serene. Even the big decisions, even David’s birth, even David’s marriage...no, not really his marriage.

On David's wedding day, he hadn't even been able to eat. And the night before the ceremony, he'd slept for less than an hour. He had deduced that it was concern for his son. Or the death knell of his own youth.

Simon sat up in bed and stretched: he didn't want to trouble the day's pleasure with three-year-old anxieties. The sun was reaching the first deep pink scrolls just outside the bird in the rug. In one motion, he threw off the sheets, which billowed, full of themselves, before falling back. He got up.

He loved being alone in the country. This house filled him with such happiness, with such quiet, that every time he found himself alone there he felt as if he was offering himself a great gift, one well beyond his means. He went out onto the large veranda and stretched again, gripping the top of the door jam. He laughed. Charlotte hated this sort of gymnastic display. He took advantage of her absence by punctuating the forbidden gesture with a great "Ah": half yawn, half shout, completely disgraceful and pleased with himself went in to make his coffee.

Sunlight splattered the kitchen. Through the French doors, Simon could see some of his roses in the huge garden. Soon, he should water them to help them get through the day, which promised to be brutal. Not a hint of a breeze this early in the morning. Not one cloud, not even the smallest hint of scattered mist on the horizon: this would be the perfect summer's day, the paradigmatic day, the standard for 1987, the necessary reference point, the one that would sum up the entire season. It was just like Charlotte to be born in July, in the hottest, the most beautiful week of the summer. He would have sworn that,

sixty-five years earlier, it had been just as hot, just as impeccably beautiful as today.

The coffee smelled good as it gurgled in the coffeepot. The floor was warm under his feet. A bumblebee in too much of a hurry ran into the screen door; insistent, he ran into it again, buzzing furiously. Simon drank his coffee as he watched the stubborn attack. Suddenly, in a gesture of ultimate rage, the bee flung itself at the screen, scolding then, with a dry plop, was thrown back and flew off, as if propelled away by its last failed attempt.

Simon arrived at the terrace at the same time as the cat who, with every step, seemed to stretch to almost twice her length.

“Hello, you old slut. Where have you been carousing?” The cat’s disdainful look was ample indication that he should mind his own business. He stretches his hand toward her, and she immediately rolls over on the ground, purring, cooing, all disdain vanished.

“Aren’t you hungry, my yellow beauty? What did you hunt this time? Not a bird, my beauty? Not a bird?” Eyes closed, wallowing religiously in his caress, Jaune stretches voluptuously, extends to her fullest length, shamelessly exposing her white belly, her head thrown back in pleasure, her teeth visible in a rictus of ecstasy.

“You don’t like that at all, do you, fat, white tummy, you don’t like that at all?” Paws dangling, Jaune purrs unreservedly, completely abandoned, ears quivering. “Do you know who’ll be here soon to pull your tail? Do you?” The purring intensifies, indifferent to Simon’s dire predictions.

“You don’t care at all, do you Jaune? You don’t care at all, my fat Jaune.” Even when he shakes one of the limp

paws, Jaune is totally incurious. Simon strokes her slowly, Jaune offers him her chin, stretching her neck for more enjoyment.

“Just wait till your torturer gets here...just wait!” Simon stops abruptly, struck by the idea that his own torturer will arrive as well. With a twist of her hips, Jaune rolls over, exposing all of her caramel-colored fur. She walks cautiously on Simon’s long thighs, and curls up squarely on his crotch. Pensive, distracted, Simon begins petting her again.

‘His torturer’... no, you couldn’t say that about David’s wife, you really couldn’t. It’s him, only him...

All the anxiety of the night, all the excitement of the day seem to converge toward that single reality: his son’s wife is coming. His son’s wife is coming to celebrate Charlotte’s birthday. Charlotte, his own wife, on her sixty-fifth birthday today.

And he is sixty-three.

And he desires this woman. This woman who is actually his son’s wife.

This woman, Catherine.