Sophie and the St. John Valley

A woman, her two horses and the forest she loves

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A story of a French Canadian woman horse logger from Northern Maine working to save her forest and her community from climate change.

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Introduction

Although much of this story is based on actual events and true life experiences, many of the characters, their families and their animals are a creation of my imagination. Each personality arrived on paper without much warning but quickly found a place in the story. I have always loved the French language, thus my choice for two venues where the language is spoken, Vietnam and Northern Maine.

Vietnam was a turning point in my life as it was for so many who survived. This book is dedicated to those who did not.

St. John River Valley, Northern Aroostook County, Maine

1971

Sophie could see the wood smoke down in the valley from her snow covered twitch path on the south side of the mountain. It would be Grandpa Philippe, home by now and starting to cook their supper. The big team, Jack and Jill, were tired and ready to head down the hill. It had been a long day but the sun and the blue sky were good company and her spirits were still high. Tomorrow was Sunday and a chance to get dressed up and go to town for church.

As was his habit, every day her dog Badger ran ahead of the horses. It was well below zero as Sophie and the team dragged the last log down the path into the woods yard and rolled it onto the sled. It was a good load. Grandpa would be pleased. Log prices had held strong through the winter.

After hooking the team, Sophie said “allons y” and the horses stepped out and down the well packed road towards home. Badger stopped at the stream to pee and Sophie spotted Bruno the black bear’s fresh tracks nearby on the snow. A normal draft team would jerk into a run at the smell of a bear, even when the scent was old, but these were Quebec born French horses called Canadian Chunks, and nothing seemed to bother them.

What bothered Sophie was what Bruno was doing running around in the dead of winter instead of being holed up in his cozy den. Grandpa Phillipe had told Sophie that, once when he was a boy and caught out in the snow on a very cold night, he knew where a mother bear was denned up with two cubs and he crawled in with them for the night. He was sure he would have frozen if she had not made room for him. Grandpa claimed that Bruno was one of her offspring.

The snow was fresh and light and the sled runners made a singing sound as they covered the three miles to grandpa’s farm. Soon they crossed the Petite Brook

Bridge where there was just enough light left to see the deer tracks on the ice. Grandpa heard Badger barking and came out to open the barn doors for the horses.

“Tu est froid?” he asked Sophie as he took off the harness. “No, I am fine with Grandma’s coat” she replied. Sophie’s first language was French, as was the case with most folks in this northern most tip of Maine. Quebec was just across the St. John’s River and there, French was the official language. Father Jacques would say mass tomorrow in French and Jack and Jill only knew commands in French. But Sophie was required by the Irish Catholic nuns to speak only English in school so she practiced it whenever she could. Her grandparents did not seem to mind.

Grandma worked in the Forget Me Not diner in St. Francis, the nearest town. It was only a small spot on the map, an elementary school, a post office, a town office and Joe’s Country Store. Sophie’s high school was in Fort Kent, sixteen miles downriver from St. Francis. Most everyone in the town worked in the woods.

Schools closed after Christmas because the logging was easier on frozen ground. Her own parents worked in a lumber camp for The Parkham Company over one hundred miles south. Her mom was the camp cook and her dad drove teams like Jack and Jill. They would come home once a month for a three day weekend and they were always full of stories. While school was closed, kids like Sophie often worked in the family woodlots like Grandpa’s, cutting saw logs or stove wood. Everyone used horses. They were cheaper to run than tractors and would always start, even on the coldest of mornings.

Grandpa and Grandma’s farm was a part of what was called the Back Settlement and for Sophie and Emile, her older brother, it was home while their parents worked away. Emile would graduate from high school this year and he had

threatened to join the Marines and fight in Vietnam. He wanted to see the world before he came back to the St. John Valley to start a family. Sophie had stopped watching the news.

Grandma Marie had just gotten home from the diner when Sophie came in the house from the barn. Marie worked till five on Saturdays but headed home early in the winter because she had no lights on her flat head Ford truck. The woodstove was now hot as she brought a bowl of buckwheat flower from the pantry and before you could say 'Jack Robinson', she had her 'ploye' pancakes frying on the stove top. With Grandpa's venison, the room filled with delicious smells.

"Ben Virgille told me he had seen Emile up in Fort Kent", Grandma said. Emile was presently working for the Great Northern Paper Company, visiting their logging camps in the winter along the St. John's River. He would scale the wood the camps crews had cut, advancing wages to their families back home in places like Bangor and Millinocket so they could have money to buy food and clothes until their husbands returned in the spring.

All at once the door flew open and there was Emile, larger than life. Badger was the first to jump on him, barking and licking his hands and face. Sophie was next, embracing her best friend and brother, followed by Grandma with a plate of food. Grandpa was shy with his affection and loaded more kindling into the stove.

"Ca va?" asked Gramps. "Ca va bien" replied Emile. "Other than the cold, all is well. I am home for the weekend." And they all gathered around the table, said grace, and began downing the delicious supper.

"So how far down river did you go this time?" asked Grandpa.

“Johnson Rihle had the last camp at the fork with the Big Black. That’s as far as I went. It was below zero all week so I carried a pole and walked the river.”

Grandpa looked up from his plate, a scowl already on his lips. “You know that is foolish. There could be a spring, thin ice, you could fall through and be frozen in minutes.”

“Yes, but I had my pole so I would not sink. I would crawl out and I always had your safety kit with me”. And with that he reached into his pocket, pulled out a small ball jar with matches and dry pieces of birch bark safely stored inside.

“And I would start a fire with these and be on my way in a few hours, just like you did years ago.”

Grandpa had been in this argument with Emile before. When he was a young man, he too had walked on the river ice, scaling. He suddenly threw up his hands, for he too had once carried that small jar, had fallen in, had straddled his pole over the broken ice and pulled himself out. With shaking hands, he had broken dead limbs off of the snow covered spruce and fir and barely started a fire. He came so close. But Emile knew where this was going so he shifted the conservation.

“I saw a new rig when the bus came through Presque Isle. It was a log machine made by The John Deere Company. I’d seen one before on a potato farm but this one is made for the woods. They say it can haul ten times what a team can haul. And it doesn’t need to be fed when it’s not working.”

Sophie felt a shiver go down her back. What would this mean for Jack and Jill? She, too, had seen farms to the south shift from big horses to tractors, had seen the

drafts standing by the fence, looking out at the world where they no longer had a place.

“Ca ne jamais marchera,” she announced. “I will always choose the horses.” And she went back to her ploys and venison.

Father DuBolais

Father Jacque DuBolais looked out over his small congregation and smiled as he greeted Sophie in the first row with a squint of his eyes. His face was tanned even in winter and his tall, well-trimmed body and brown hair belied his sixty years. He was a walker and often found himself at Sophie's farm on the weekends. More than once he had taken a peavey and rolled logs up on the sled for Jack and Jill to pull. His daughter Nicole would be close to Sophie's eighteen years if she were alive today.

"Bonjour," he began to those seated in front of him and they replied in kind, but with a very different accent. In those first months of his tenure, they stood back when he spoke, because when he spoke French, his mouth would take the shape of a 'trou d'oeuf', the hole where the chicken egg came out. The parishioners of St. Francis were Quebecois, people of the county, the forest and the fields. They were shy and cool to him and his Parisian accent, for he was from away, from across the sea. But over time they warmed to him, sharing in confession their hopes, their dreams and their losses. In the darkness of the confessional they would tell him of their shortcomings, what they called their 'peches". And when they were done and the small church was empty, he would sit in the confessional alone and remember his own sins and his own losses.

Father Jacque grew up as the oldest of five boys on the France coast in a small town called Le Tourquet Paris Plague. He loved soccer and swimming. His mother was a writer of short stories for a Paris magazine and his father was an architect. The family had money and sent all the sons to universities around Europe.

Jacques started college in Berlin in 1935, joined the Bauhaus School of Architecture and during his second year fell in love with a classmate and married. But when asked to join the Nazi club of Berlin, they both quickly returned to France and watched as Europe entered World War Two.

When the invasion finally came, Le Tourquet was one of the last places in France the Germans occupied. In May of 1944 Jacque was a leader in the local resistance when his family was evacuated. His wife Alice and their two young children, Nakita and Nicole and his two parents, boarded a fishing boat for England without him late one dark night in August. They made half the crossing when a Luftwaffe bomber sank the ship with all lives lost.

As a young man he never imagined becoming a priest. But after the war ended he needed a job where no one needed to know his past. Sometimes during Saturday evening confessions, he was tempted to stop the woman who was asking for forgiveness and ask her if she thought God would forgive him for surviving a war where everyone in his family dies, except him. He would lie awake at night in this village of fifty souls struck by the fact that he no longer believed in God.

St Charles Church, St Francis, Maine

After church, Sophie checked to make sure Badger was still down by the brook where she had left him and asked Father Jacque for lunch. “Emile is home full of stories and he would love to see you.”

“Thank you Sophie, I would love to come.” So after saying good-by to the last of the parishioners, he set out for the long walk. Sophie had kindly left Badger to accompany him and they both headed down the state numbered highway and soon turned onto the woods on the Sunset Road.

Jacque loved walking with Badger for he could tell the dog all the things he needed to get off his chest without his parishioners hearing a word. “Badger, could you hear my sermon today. I think not, because you were down by the brook. I don’t blame you. I wish I could have been there instead of on the altar. You know it’s on these days that I wonder if God really exists. The snow is melting, soon the flowers will bloom, but for me it is like salt in a wound. Spring makes me sad. Why is that?”

Badger would on these occasions give up all the animal scent he’d been following and join in walking next to the priest. The rub on his head felt good. “Why did he always feel this way this on Sundays?” Badger wondered.

Father Jacque had changed from his cassock and surplus into jeans, a light flannel shirt and warm coat before he left the church. Badger barked when he came to Bruno’s tracks and Father Jacques wondered out loud what a bear was doing out this early.

Jacque himself once had a dog whose name was Slip who would spend all day, if allowed, chasing the waves back out into the sea from whence they had come. Jacque wondered then why Slip did this every time they went to the beach. On Jacque's final last day in France, Slip hid, not going to the beach until the exact moment the dory arrived. He then quietly ran down in the dark, jumping aboard with Jacque and licking his master's hand, heading out to sea and the safety of England.When Jacque arrived in Dover and learned that his whole family had perished, he never let his dog out of sight. All he had left was Slip.

Jacque found work at a Catholic school outside London where Slip was welcomed. He taught French and art and began designing again, but he could not forgive God for what He had done to his family. He migrated on a ship to Boston, listed "Catholic Priest" as a profession, and spoke French. He claimed an eye injury so Slip could enter as a service dog and was assigned a church along the border with Quebec in Northern Maine. He studied Latin, learned the Mass and the nearest Catholic Bishop was in Bangor, rarely visiting and very glad that there was a French speaker to serve this remote parish.

While Badger and the priest were ambling their way down the Sunset Road, Sophie had run home as fast as her long legs would carry her. She had roasted a chicken the night before and now stuck it in the oven of the wood stove to reheat. She had met her brother Emile by the bridge. He was never much of a church goer but a real fan of Father Jacque.

"He should be right behind me," Sophie smiled and Emile jogged down the road to meet the priest.

Emile had an interesting relationship with the Father Jacque. While in high school two hours away in Presque Isle, he was living with an uncle and only home twice a month. Omce at a “Sadie Hawkins” dance last fall, a girl he was sweet on asked him to accompany her. But an old boyfriend took offence and things got rough. Emile was ejected and when he refused to stay outside, the doors to the gym were locked. So Emile took his chainsaw from his pickup and sawed down the gym doors.

To most folks in Presque Isle, this made him somewhat of a hero. But, in spite of being a star basketball player, he was expelled from school. Unannounced and unexpectedly, Father Jacque appeared before the school board, a repayment plan for new doors was set up and Emile was able to return to his classes and sports.

“For a priest, Father Jacque is very cool,” Emile told many of his friends.

“Bojour, Emile,” Father Jacque shouted from a distance. “Bonjour, Pere Jacque, ca va?” replied Emile.

“Ca va bien, merci,” replied Jacque. “Quelles sont les nouvelles?”

“Oh, nothing much,” said Emile. “We won the district championship again. Everyone was very pleased.”

Last year, when Father Jacque had made the trip south to watch Emile play, he had found himself wondering if his son might have been as great an athlete as Emile, would his daughter have loved the forest like Sophie. He knew his wife would have approved of his present work, would have been happy to settle into married life with a rural priest rather than an architect. He had to chuckle at the notion of a north woods Catholic priest with a wife and family.

Emile found the priest easy to talk with about almost anything, unlike his own father who was stern and often drunk when not away in a woods camp. Emile had even been so bold, on his last visit home, as to ask the priest questions involving relationships with female classmates. Emile could not put his finger on why it was, but their village priest was so much more accessible than those in Presque Isle's churches. When he was at home in St. Francis, Emile would receive communion every Sunday with no mention from the priest of the required confession.

There was plenty of room at the farm table for everyone. Sophie had set flats of pansies on the table next to the chicken and baked beans because she said that spring was just around the corner. Grandma kept the food coming from the wood stove and Grandpa sat in the corner in his favorite chair, looking out at the barnyard and any passing traffic. An impish grin passed over his face.

"I saw Mark Bouchard go by this morning driving a large four wheeled drive tractor. He headed up the Sunset Road toward Thibodaux Brook."

"What color was it, Grandpa?" asked Emile.

"It was yellow with the letters John Deere 440 A on the side."

Emile jumped up and raced over to the window, then caught Grandpa's smile out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh Grandpa, you just wait. They will be coming soon enough," Emile countered.

"Well, I hope so," replied Grandpa, "because Mark never was much good at driving a team."

After lunch Grandma, Jacque and Sophie followed Badger up the hillside tote road to the logging yard. Grandma had not been up to the height of land since the fall and wanted to see the view now that some of the trees had been cut. This one hundred acre section of the three hundred acre woodlot was from her family. Her own parents had cut the timber every winter as had her grandparents. They were the first to say that, if done right, you could live well from the trees. The sun was now at its height and, sitting on stumps out of the wind, you could tell that spring was coming.

"I saw Brun's tracks on Friday as I brought the team home," said Sophie. "What do you think he is doing out of his den this early?"

"Well, let's go home that way and see," and with that Grandma jumped up, straightened out her seventy year old legs and, like a teenager, headed down a snow covered trail to the north. Sophie had never approached the den this way. Grandmother said after about thirty minutes of walking through deep snow, "We need to approach the den from the east so that Badger won't smell Brun and start barking."

The Thibodaux Brook was already running with an early melt but the ice held and they all crossed over. But as they crested the bank what greeted them was a wide road cut out of the forest. Rocks were pushed left and right and much of the soil had been moved as it had been unfrozen under the deep snow.

"Quesque ce que ca?" asked Jacque. "Why a road back here." All stood quietly listening to the water rushing nearby.

Finally Grandma said "It is because of the trees. They want all the trees."

Grandma jumped ahead of the group and started walking fast. All at once she shouted, “Fils de pute, look what they have done”.

There in front of them was a giant hemlock that had been toppled to the ground by whatever machine had made the road. Under its roots, Brun’s winter den was exposed naked to the world.

“Who could have been so stupid as to have done this? Everyone on this road knows where Brun winters over. He has never bothered us and now someone has destroyed his home. Who has done this?”

Grandma looked out into the forest of giant red spruce and pine and demanded an answer. None came from the darkened wood.

Spring- 1968

Sophie started the spring term of her senior year in high school the first week in March. Her parents had come home unannounced for a long weekend in late February but returned to the camp quickly to prepare for the annual log drive. Sophie's father Francis would head the crew driving the river, starting many miles to the south. These men would keep the logs moving on the water at all costs, sometimes using dynamite to unblock a snarl on the river bank. Sophie's mom Marie would coordinate all the meals for the men. Because the St. John ran north to Fort Kent before turning south through Canada towards the ocean, Sophie's school would get the day off to watch the logs pass through town and Sophie would again see her parents, if only for one night, as she helped her mom feed the crew.

Those teamsters who had been cutting and yarding logs all winter began filtering back to St. Francis, walking their horses through ancient woods roads used by native peoples for centuries. Once home, the horses would only get a short rest before they would be plowing vegetable gardens or potato fields. Mud season was fast approaching. Logging roads were closed to heavy traffic. Most of these men would sleep for days, having not been in a soft bed since Christmas. Then there would be a special Mass that Father Jacques would say, thanking God for the safe return of so many in the village.

Jack and Jill spent mud season munching hay in their stall, watching the snow melt and the road turning to mush. Because Grandma's truck could not travel the dirt road to town, Grandpa would harness the team every morning to take her to work

at the Diner and pick her up at the end of the day. Sometimes Sophie would catch a ride home from school and Grandpa would always ask her to drive.

Sophie could not wait till spring when she could again work the horses around Grandpa's farm, plowing gardens and spreading manure. Deep snow had unexpectedly come late this year and she had not seen her neighbors or Father Jacque for weeks. And there had been no sign of Brun. But there had been news of a large logging operation starting up on the Jones Brook lot, not waiting for the roads to dry. The talk was that they would not be using horses but rather the new machines that ran on tires and chains and they would be cutting everything that could be sold. Signs appeared at the Diner looking for men to drive the machines and several draft teams already were posted for sale as well. Emile came home from his senior year and signed up chopping for a skidder crew. Sophie was first disappointed and then very upset.

"How could you do this?" she asked over supper. Grandma and Grandpa kept quiet. "You know that we should be logging in the forest only when the soil is frozen."

"Oh, come on Sophie, this is the way of the future. Horses are great but they will eat you out of house and home if they are not working. You guys will do fine, you will not change your ways. Jack and Jill never liked me anyways."

Sophie knew that there was no changing her brother's mind. Emile needed to leave the valley and the river and go out and see the world. But there had been horses logging and plowing on this farm since grandma's great grandparents were deeded this land in 1874 and Sophie's dream was to raise a family here in that tradition. Emile might leave but she would stay.

There were a stretch of hills between her farm and the Jones Brook Lot so it was not till the end of school before she invited Father Jacque and Badger to take a Sunday walk that way. As they came down over the rise, they saw only tree stumps where there had been a stand of one hundred year old red spruce the winter before. Even the tree that had covered Brun's den was gone. And in their place stood a long row of ten log skidders and six stake body logging trucks, some filled and ready to head to local mills the next day. What these machines had cut in six weeks was more that she and Grandpa and Jack and Jill could cut in six years. Each skidder had the name of the owner stenciled on the hoods, Bouchard, Blanchette, Ryon, Collard, all French, none she knew. But all the trucks had the same name on their doors, Black River Lumber Company, Madawaska, Maine.

Grandma said these loggers were sitting in their pickups every morning when she came to work, waiting for their coffee. Most had left Fort Kent by 4 am for the 80 mile trip one way. They seemed tired, quiet, not unfriendly, just very polite. She began arriving early herself, just because she felt badly for them. Grandma said something seemed missing from their lives. Emile called it progress; Sophie called it "over my dead body!"

Da Nang, South Vietnam, Fall 1970

I arrived in a giant cargo plane from Saigon early on a Sunday morning. Da Nang Airport was filled with GI's, most in dirty uniforms, some sleeping, some coming in or going out. Everyone that was awake was smoking. I had been in-country two months.

Except for my green infantry pants, I was dressed in civilian clothing and my hair was definitely not regulation. Across the hallway from me sat a young soldier, in full Marine combat regalia, except for his T-shirt, which read "Don't you move a God damn inch." I remembered that line from a "Bert and I" popular Maine humor recording. I walked over to him and said "Can you tell me the way to East Millinocket?" He stood up, smiled and said "My name is Emile, sir."

We found a quiet place to sit outside near a helicopter landing pad. Every so often, one would arrive and a dead or dying soldier would be carried off to an ambulance.

Emile's hands were shaking as he pulled a Pall Mall cigarette from its pack. He lit it with one flick of the lighter on his pant leg and deeply inhaled. I sat quietly, waiting to see where the conversation might be going.

"I'm short, due to head back to the world in three weeks. It has been real bad here recently." Even thought we were in the shade, he was sweating profusely. He moved closer.

"Excuse me sir, but do you live in Maine and what are you doing over here?"

“Well Emile, my last address in Maine was Bowdoinham, south of Augusta where I worked on a chicken farm but I am here to help some soldiers who have gotten themselves into a bit of trouble.”

“Are you a lawyer?”

“No, but I work with one. You see, when I was in the service, I lost a bunch of my men over here because no one would listen to me. It’s too late to bring them back but I am trying to do something so that might not happen again.”

Emile looks around to see if anyone is watching our conversation. The noise of aircraft landing and taking off made it somehow safer to converse.

“Two months ago, a new Lieutenant arrived from the States. He was what we call a ‘ninety day wonder’. We could tell he was ‘scared shit’ and we let him know that we would take care of the unit. He could just sit back and take notes.

“We had a great group of guys, Tom Gallagher from Boston, Jose Forte, Houston, Ed Leibowitz, rural Alabama. We had seen it all. But this Lieutenant, Jim Cooper, would have none of that. He knew it all and he almost got us killed on several occasions. He lasted twenty one days. We drew straws to see who would shoot him in the next firefight.

“To survive over here, you’re either drunk or stoned. No one back in ‘the world’ is getting the real picture of what is happening to us. My folks write saying how proud they are of me, they can’t wait till the day I return home.

“I started on coke to get through this. Now I am on heroin. Easy to get, cheap, but I am rotating out in twenty three days. How will I get my fix up in The County? I come from a small Quebecois village two hours from the closest big city.

“My parents are practically illiterate, work farming and logging. They have no idea what I have been through. The last time they saw me I was having a banner season playing basketball. I have just one friend at home who might help. I think that he, too, has been through some heavy shit. He’s a priest and a good guy.”

“Emile, you don’t know me from Adam”, I said. “But I have a small idea of what you have been through. I am finished here in ten days and I then fly directly back home. I can call the priest and tell him about the help you need. Perhaps he can meet you in Bangor or Houlton and together you both could work out a strategy for going home.”

Arriving back home, I looked at a road map and learned that Philadelphia, Pa. was closer to me than St. Francis, a town on the Canadian border in Northern Aroostook County, Maine. I would drive to St. Francis, meet the priest and the French speaking people of the St. John Valley face to face. But who was I kidding. I knew nothing about drug addiction and my French needed some work.

Berlin, 1936

The warehouse on Birkbusch Strasse #49 seemed dark and cold. Once the home of two of the most progressive teachers of architecture and furniture in the world, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, the Bauhaus School was now struggling to survive the rising force of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Jacque entered its unlocked doors on an early June morning in 1936. A handful of students were working on projects lit by the sun that poured in through tall industrial windows. Someone was making coffee and a piano was playing in the distance.

Alice was working on a small table made from wood scavenged from a discarded industrial pallet and stained with oil. He found the source of the coffee smell and made her a cup. It was love at first sight.

She was from London, a student of Marcel's, and was passionate about making useable things from throw away refuse. Jacque's own father, Michel, had gone to school with Breuer in Paris so he and Alice had much to discuss. They soon moved in together but their time in Berlin would be cut short.

Neither of them spoke German nor shared their friends' bohemian life style. Their neighborhood was something of a slum, the air filled with delicious Turkish and mid-eastern cooking. Their only solace was a visit to a park not far from their flat, a refuge with tall trees and many birds. One day they were visited at their flat by members of the Nazi Youth Brigade who "'invited' them to join the party of the Fuhrer. Within the week they were on the night train to Paris.

Jacque's parents welcomed them both with open arms and within a year they were wed. Two children, a boy and a girl, soon followed. Those years before the war were heady ones. Some believed that Germany would leave them alone, "after all it was just about the Jews." Others knew differently, had seen artists and musicians on the firing line. At Le Tourquet Paris Plague, the DuBolais family lived almost in sight of England, "just a short swim", Michel would remind them.

That night on the beach where they had played and swam all summer became the last hug, the last kiss. The young son and daughter had only a slight notion what was up, just another adventure. Planes were flying overhead, gunfire was heard out behind the Le Tourquet home.

"I will be along soon. Slip will keep me safe. God bless!" and they were gone.

Easter- 1970

Father Jacque went for a walk with his new dog Deux Slip along the St. John River on Saturday evenings if he were not out visiting parishioners. He would talk with his dog like they were old friends that passed stories back and forth.

“Slip, do you remember the story I told you about the night your father jumped into the dory with me? What faith did he have that we would survive? Did he tell me all would be well, that we would survive when so many didn’t?”

“Well, today I must tell the parishioners of St. Charles that the miracle is not that Jesus did not die. He did die, on a Friday. He knew he was going to die yet he did not stop it. This is the miracle, not the resurrection story that came two days later.

“How do I tell them this? We have people from our parish now fighting in Vietnam. Emile, Frank, Pierre, all of them in harm’s way. If they die in a faraway place, do we suggest that they may be born again? I don’t think so. Does that mean that their deaths are in vain, somehow less worthy than if they could be born again? I don’t think so.”

And Deux Slip stops at a bush, takes a pee and looks back as his master as if to say, “Good luck with that one!”

There was a strange car in the church parking lot when they returned from their walk. I was sitting in the front seat.

Mud Season

The rain kept falling all spring and by June everyone's gardens were coming up green. But the Jones Brook Road finally gave out after weeks of skidder and log truck traffic and the Black River Lumber Company was forced to shift its operation over to Sophie's Sunset Road. Residents there were outraged when the truckers disregarded the banded road signs. The head selectman called the State Police who claimed they had no jurisdiction.

Grandpa still brought Grandma to work and picked her up with the horses and soon he was scooting his neighbors over the muddy road to and from town as well. The Forget Me Not's parking lot was filled to overflow with Sunset Road cars and Black River logging trucks. Everyone seemed to be on pins and needles. Even though the truckers were 'from away', Grandma managed to put a smile on everyone's face. She even brought her harmonica along one day and played it at lunch.

Sophie's neighbor Monica Bernard lived further in on the Sunset Road and was due to have a child born in early May. Because of the road conditions, people wondered aloud if she should leave for the hospital well before her labor began. She already had a young family of five girls and her husband worked an hour north in Ft. Kent. Neighbors agreed that they would do what they could to help. When her water broke on a Friday morning, Grandma got the call at the Diner. She then called Sophie who harnessed and hooked up the team and headed toward Monica's.

Grandma was between meals so she left the Diner and stationed herself at the entrance to the Sunset Road. Her plan was to stop any incoming logging traffic so Sophie and her passenger would have a clear shot out. Francine Dube would have a car at the diner to make the run to the Northern Maine Medical Center in Ft. Kent. And Marie Dube, Francine's sister, would return with Sophie to look after Monica's five kids.

Sophie knew something was not right after picking up her passenger when they passed the Petite Brook Bridge. Monica had stopped talking and was breathing heavily. Sophie did not dare to kiss the horses into a trot because the road was so rutted and mud filled. In the distance she could see Rt. 161 where several logging trucks were pulled off to the side.

Grandma assessed the situation upon the scoot's arrival on Main Street. She asked Sophie to park it as close to the diner's door as possible. Two other truckers then arrived at the edge of the scoot with a long, narrow section of the diner's countertop onto which Monica slowly slid her body. Several men gathered up two tables from the dining area, pushing them together to make one. Sophie then asked Jack and Jill to turn her scoot around and headed back up the Sunset Road with Marie Dube, now on board, to baby sit Monica's family. Sophie headed out and down the road but had to wait till supper to hear the rest of the story from Grandma.

Grandma's report: "Well, when Sophie left with Marie, one of the logging truckers, Chuck Reynard, he is the cousin of Claudette's here in the village, Chuck asks for warm water to be boiled and for some towels. I say 'Hey, wait a minute. There is someone coming to take her to Ft. Kent!'

“Chuck quietly turns to me and says, ‘This baby is going to be born in the Forget Me Not’. I then politely ask everyone to leave and two minutes later Charlotte Bernard comes into the world.

“How did you know she was coming?’ I asked Chuck.

“At home in St. Agatha we have many cows and sheep,” he replied. “In the spring, I do this every day.”

And just as Sophie pulled into the Bernard farm yard, the phone call came through with the good news. Marie hopped off to be with the kids and Sophie returned to the diner. Chuck and the truckers all pulled over on the Sunset Road and waved Sophie past and the baby was nursing when she arrived.

Father Jacque was there to bless the child whose mother then insisted that she and Charlotte return home immediately. It was a tradition in the St. John Valley to stay as far from doctors and hospitals as possible. But she did agree to have Father Jacque join them on the scoot.

“So tomorrow there will be a crew from WKFT-TV to do a story on the miracle of The Forget Me Not,” Grandma announced before the scoot departed. “You must be here with Jack and Jill. I am afraid that Chuck will be too shy to attend.”

For some reason Sophie was not excited with this planned event. As she and the priest returned from taking mother and daughter home, Sophie tried to work out her own doubts.

Father Jacque announced he would try and locate Marie’s husband at work in Fort Kent and tell him of the good news. Jacque had no car. He had felt it would be a

waste of his meager salary. And all he had to do was walk down Main Street and every passing car would stop to say hello and ask if needed a ride. He loved being outside in the open air, visiting his parishioners who were house bound. He loved their welcome, especially when he brought his dog. But today he had left Deux Slip at the parish house. As they rode along over the bumpy road back to the Diner, Jacque noticed Sophie's uncharacteristic silence.

"So, mon amie, what are your thoughts? Is it about the newborn?"

"No, that was wonderful how everyone joined in to help. It showed how the spirit of our village is still alive. What confuses me is that until today I thought of these men, the truckers and skidder operators, only as the ones who had destroyed the Sunset Road and the Jones Brook Road and the surrounding forests. They came in here as if they owned the place.

"Yet today that man Chuck, who helped deliver Charlotte, he could not have been nicer. He was so gentle with that small child. And all the truckers who sprang to action, they were so great. They even pulled over when I passed them later on the road and waved. Maybe because of this baby we have all become friends."

"So tell me more about what these men destroyed," Father Jacque requested.

"Maybe it is only what these men represent. Their logging here in our valley has caused the price that Grandpa and I will receive for the logs we cut this winter to be one third lower than last year. That has never happened before. Always Parkman Lumber has paid us the top prices because our quality is so high. But these crews with their mechanized equipment are cutting everything, leaving nothing for the future and flooding the market with pine and spruce. My family and

my neighbors have always left the best trees. Those men took the best. This is a crime and I thought of these men as the criminals."

"This is capitalism," smiled Father Jacque.

"Maybe," retorted Sophie, "but Grandma sells coffee at the restaurant six days a week and no one suffers. Marie sells her lettuce and potatoes to tourists in the summer and no one suffers. That is capitalism. Why does logging have to be different?"

Sophie had to kiss the horses along as they were tired of pulling the scoot over the bumpy, boney road.

"What are you going to be doing this time next year?" asked the priest.

"I am not sure. My teachers say I can win a scholarship to Forestry School in Orono. But who would log with Grandpa when the snow arrives? Grandpa and Grandma cannot survive on income from the Diner alone. And Emile is already tired of riding a skidder and wants to join the service. Who would be left to protect what we have left?"

"What if you took off the winter term and went to school spring, summer and fall?

"You see," the priest went on, "you need tools to protect this community, this way of life. You have great wisdom for the ways of nature and its animals. What you need are the tools to protect them from being destroyed. These tools are waiting for you at University. Just don't wait too long."

For some unknown reason Jacque felt Deux Slip resting between his feet on the scoot, even though he knew he was safely back at the parsonage. He remembered

the night in France when he said good-by to his family for the last time. His reason for his not joining them was that when the boat was ready to push out through the surf, his first dog Slip was nowhere to be found. He could not leave without his best friend. He had to say goodbye and, by staying behind, Slip had saved his life. Who was he to give Sophie advice?

Fall 1970

I slowly climbed out of the car as a tall man in jeans and cotton shirt made his way down the hill. His dog ran up to me and gave me a smell.

“Bonjour,” I said in my best Parisian French. “Ca va?”

“Ca va bien, merci, et vous?” he queried.

“Tout va bien, aussi,” and I stuck out my hand.

“Do you need directions, are you lost perhaps and have stumbled into paradise?” he smiled. I liked him immediately.

“I have been lost for years but I am slowly finding my way,” I replied. “Most recently I have been in Vietnam. I came home just last Wednesday. I have come here to St. Francis directly at the request of Emile.”

“Mon dieu,” he said and his eyes clouded over. “You mean Emile Jilbert? Is he alright? What can I do?” For a moment he seemed the one to be lost.

“Perhaps we could go for a walk,” I suggested. “I have had a long drive and I need to stretch my legs.”

So either by instinct or as part of a tour that had been saved for new arrivals, he first directed me down Main Street, then swung right across from the Diner and finally headed east out Sunset Drive towards Emile’s grandparent’s home.

I told Father Jacque what Emile had told me, nothing more. I chose not to include details of my life. I was not yet sure how much I wanted to get involved in this affair. There were times on my twelve hour drive north that I regretted getting involved at all. I had done what I told Emile I would do, just make a call and no matter what happened after that, I would be free to leave.

But at the same time there were several parallels with Emile and me that I could not deny. I spoke French and my father bought pine lumber from Tom Parkman's mill from trees that might have been harvested by Emile's family. I too had a tumultuous time with Vietnam, and I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. But, unlike Emile, I was a child of privilege, playing soccer at Harvard College while Emile drove skidder in the St. John Valley. And most importantly, I had yet to experience anything in my life that came close to face to face combat.

There was still a good amount of snow along the side of the road and Jacque's dog Deux Slip seemed to know where we were headed. Jacque finally began talking when we reached a small bridge.

"First, thank you for coming all this way. It means a great deal to me that we have a head start, that when Emile comes home we are better prepared. You know, he has a temper which kept getting him in trouble up here.

"A cousin down in Lewiston got him a well-paying job in the Knapp Shoe Company where he stitched moccasins by hand all day. He made good money and good friends. But his boss was a bully who would pick on the weaker ones in the work force. One day Emile stood up for a man with a speech defect and popped the boss in the jaw. He was arrested and charged with assault. The judge privately

sympathized with Emile and gave him the option of either six months in jail or the armed forces. Nine months later he was a Marine in Vietnam."

I made note of one more ironic parallel. As a young boy, my father would take me down the road from our seaside home to a fancy estate where there was a tennis court. We would then have memorable matches that I will cherish for the rest of my life. Clarence Knapp of Knapp Shoe Company was the owner of that tennis court and that Maine shoe company and was my father's good friend.

"I too have had a taste of warfare in my life," Jacque confessed. "And I have lost much. But I have discovered a powerful force here that can heal the most pain, can overcome the most addiction. It is this St. John Valley community.

"These folks don't judge you for what you have done, for they have all been there at some time in their lives. They go to the forest to heal, go to the garden to find balance, go to the rivers to clean their wounds. We need to learn more about narcotic addiction and treatment and we need to bring Emile back to nature, back to the horses, back to the forest so he can begin to live again."

That night, we had supper with Emile's grandparents. His sister Sophie was away at university but I met Jack and Jill and Sophie's dog Badger. Grandma and Grandpa were overjoyed with the news of Emile's returning sometime in the future from Vietnam in one piece. We chose not to mention the one piece he was missing. Sophie had spent the past winter semester logging with Grandpa. They had sold their pine and spruce logs to Tom Parkman and my mind played with the idea that I might stop at the mill in Ashland on the way home but I put that notion back in my pocket.

“Maybe it would be a good idea if you could meet Sophie on your way south,” said Father DuBolais. “She started college this year with a major in forestry. Tonight you will stay with me and tomorrow before you leave, I must take you on a walk.”

I slept soundly that night on Jacques’ couch, had breakfast at the diner with Grandma cooking, and then he and I head out into the woods

“Sophie’s plan was to go to the state college in September, then take a winter break to log with Grandpa, then return to school when mud season came along. I had accompanied her to the interview, had seen how impressed the admissions department was with her passion and intellect. But there was just no way the nearby Ft. Kent campus could facilitate that schedule. But further south, the Forestry Department at the University of Maine at Orono could. Her application was accepted in just two weeks.

“So it was on a cool September Saturday morning that Grandma, Grandpa and I all stood at the Ft. Kent bus station to say good-by. “Two hundred and sixty five miles, four hours and thirty minutes, that is what the bus driver said.” Tears were in Grandma’s eyes. She herself had only been out of the St. John Valley once to visit a sister in Caribou. That had been a two hour trip each way and she did not stay the night.

“A bus arrived from nowhere and before we knew it, Sophie was gone. No one remembers how we all got home. We ultimately all went back to our uncomplicated lives, I hearing confession and Mass every Sunday and helping Sophie’s family dig potatoes. But I so missed her energy and passion. I often caught myself seeing my own daughter out of the corner of my eye, playing with her brother or jumping fully clothed into the ocean. Sophie’s departure became a

constant reminder of the sadness I still carried with me on my long walks with Deux Slip."

Slip looked up at the mention of his name as we crossed the Petite Brook Bridge. I made note that this priest had just mentioned a son and a daughter.

"Emile was still living with his grandparents and working on a logging crew down in Allagash. He was making good money but he acted as if he were lost. He did not seem to have friends and in the fall, went hunting alone. He came home one snowy evening and confided in me that he had come across a four point buck but he could just not shoot. The animal was just too beautiful. It sounded like a confession to me."

"Shortly after this, he moved south to Lewiston and worked in a shoe shop. I felt like he could not trust himself and he needed to move away from those whom he loved or he might hurt them when he crashed. He got in a fight, the judge sent him to war and that was that. So from his pastor's point of view, drug addiction was the logical next step."

We had taken a left off the Sunset Road and walked down a tote path and up a steep rise. The forest thickened and turned the bright morning into dusk.

"This is the beginning of Sophie's family land. Her great grandmother was born in the same house where we dined last night. Feel how moist the soil is under your shoes; listen to the small brooks running everywhere. How many different bird calls can you count in the next thirty minutes?"

As we walked down a small valley and into a lush green understory of trees, a canopy of branches high above us hid our presence from a passing eagle or turkey buzzard.

“This is the way Sophie believes the forests in Maine should look like. Her family has made a living from this land for over one hundred years and it is in better health than before the early settlers arrived.”

We walked on. “Thirteen different birds,” I announced as I looked down at my watch. “Good,” said Father Jacque. Then we came round a corner and walked into a clearing that looked like the surface of the moon.

“Sophie blames this destruction on Maine’s forest products industry. Pulp and paper have eaten up what the saw timber mills have not. This damaged ecosystem is then left to fend off insects and disease. I am an architect by training and have learned about the forest from her. For me a building is nothing without a strong foundation. Here the foundation is being ruined.

“Horses would not have done this. Where the horses would have gone around, the four wheeled machinery went over. Sophie is a force, she is a warrior but she also deeply believes in nature and its ability to heal. You need to know this before you meet her. She is roused by the thunder she hears on the horizon but she trusts in the goodness of mankind.”

When we returned from our walk a red light was blinking on Jacques answering machine. He sat down and beckoned me to fetch a pen on the kitchen counter. He wrote some numbers down and hung up.

“Emile has arrived in Boston and it taking the over-night bus to Caribou, from there a cab to the Ft. Kent Hospital. He is in contact with a Dr. Phyllis Meyer who apparently has some experience treating drug addiction. He suggests that I meet him there and asks that no one from his family should know he is in Maine. He says he needs to talk.”

Parkman Lumber

Sophie returned to her dorm and found her roommate not back yet from Easter break. She was glad to have a few minutes to herself after her long trip. The conference at the Harvard Forest in Massachusetts had some good parts but too much time had been spent inside. It was like looking at a patient's symptoms on a television set rather than standing bedside. And she missed Grandma and Grandpa.

They had stopped logging for mud season but it had come late this year with all the snow and a hard frost in the ground. She had made her annual visit to Parkman Lumber with a scale sheet of over eighty thousand feet of white pine and sixty thousand feet of red spruce. Tom Parkman had come to look forward to her visits.

"You know, Sophie, my father and my mother's grandfather worked with horses together for many years. But I don't claim to have the kind of broad understand that you must now have as you are about to graduate from school and become a forester."

"Well, Mr. Parkman, I am less clear after my years of schooling as to why the forest industry is ruining what your father and my grandfather have worked so hard to preserve. With the arrival of the skidder and expensive machinery, we thought there would be fewer deaths and injury but the opposite has happened.

"My brother worked driving a skidder before going to Vietnam. His boss made him work longer and faster to make the payments on that machine. But as more wood was cut faster, the market was flooded and the price at the mill dropped. Didn't anybody see that coming?"

Sophie could feel herself getting worked up and took a deep breath. This lumber company had a reputation for treating their workers well. A parent of one of her classmates working for Parkman during a hard economic period was offered an interest free loan by Tom to buy a new washing machine when his old one broke and they could not afford a new one.

“Sir, I have a lot to learn and am grateful for my chance to be guided by some very special people.” And that day she left Tom with a feeling that he just might be one of those people. Sophie had that way about her.

The Deal

Back in St. Charles rectory, Jacque asked me to stay another night and I agreed. He then called Doctor Meyer who suggested that we meet at her office the following morning at 7:00 am. We bypassed the Diner as Grandma would want to know where we were going at such an early hour and found the doctor's office on the hospital's second floor.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Father Douboullet. I have heard so many good things from your parishioners under my care. When life slows down I hope to visit St. Francis." The doctor was probably in her late forties, stunningly beautiful and not wearing a ring. I smiled at the notion that for her, St. Francis might as well be a distant country.

"Thank you doctor,' replied Emile a bit shyly. "I appreciate your meeting with us at such short notice. Peter saw Emile in Vietnam just a few weeks ago and came up here immediately upon returning home."

Dr. Meyer then turned her full attention to me.

"Peter, could you fill me in on why you were in that war zone?"

"I had been an officer on a naval ship heading to Vietnam. I discovered one of the guns under my control was dangerously compromised and notified the captain. He refused to acknowledge my concerns so I reported him to our squadron commander. I was taken off my ship. Apparently for my captain, whistle blowing

was to be rewarded with a court martial. The ship continued to Vietnam without me.

“I was raised near Boston on what is affectionately called the Irish Riveria. I went to the right boarding schools and am a Harvard grad. When the Boston Globe expressed interest in my story, the Navy quickly dropped charges and I was honorably discharged. Nine months later the gun barrel exploded off of Vung Tao beach, killing and injuring several of my men. I was alive and free and my men were not.

“I had some experience in military law so I was asked to join a civilian legal team headed to Saigon to defend young soldiers, mostly black or Hispanic, convicted of murdering their own officers. They were being held in the brig at Lon Bing, south of Saigon. I met Emile one afternoon at De Nang Airport on the eve of my departure home. He looked like so many men I had interviewed and helped defend. And when we shared a joke about Maine, he reached out for help.”

After some quiet reflection, Dr. Meyer said “The official statistic now is that ten to twenty five percent of soldiers returning from Southeast Asia are addicted to heroin. Our government has instituted a recovery process for these men, treating the addiction with the drug Methadone. We have the drug here at the hospital, on hand for such emergencies.”

Father Jacques looked incredulous. “You mean you want to tread one drug with another?”

“I fully agree,” the doctor replied. “It makes little sense to me. But there are few alternatives and, in the end, it is up to the patient.”

Just then Dr. Meyer's phone rang. "Emile is here, apparently with his sister Sophie. They are on their way up."

Sophie looked like nothing I had imagined. She had bright red hair cut short, a crushing handshake and a curious smile on her face. Emile looked worn out in spite of a clean shirt and civilian pants. Dr. Meyer managed the introductions.

"Thank you all for coming. I must ask Emile first of all if he is comfortable with those presently in the room. Normally this initial conversation would be reserved for immediate family only."

"Yes," he replied immediately. "I am grateful to be home and need all the help I can get to recover from my ordeal."

Dr. Meyer continued. "This morning's first session will cover the details of a drug addiction you acquired while in Vietnam. There may be legal issues that need to be addressed. Do the non-family members present feel that their presence today is appropriate?"

"I think that I may need to dismiss myself," I said.

"Please don't," Emile said emphatically. "You are the only one in this group that has seen what I saw. I need to have someone to corroborate what life for an American soldier is like in Vietnam today, especially when seen through the lens of heroin."

I agreed to stay, but not knowing for how long.

Dr. Meyer nodded and then went on. “I talked with the Military Discharge Office in Boston and they told me you have an honorable discharge with no issues pending. Does that mean that they have no knowledge of your drug issue?”

“No mam. With all due respect, they could care less. There were vets shooting up in South Station right in front of the cops. With me gone, they have one less problem.”

“Well Emile, with your permission, I would like to begin today with a series of counseling session. That is my expertise. Yes, I can stop arterial bleeding and treat gunshot wounds but my specialty is working with trauma, especially trauma that is induced by combat.

“The U.S. Military today has tens of thousands of soldiers returning stateside with rampant drug addiction. They have made treatment available free of charge to men like you. Much is still in the experimental stage but I believe that we can turn this around. What do you think?”

Emile looked down at the floor. “In Vietnam I had no idea who I could trust, the old lady begging me for a cigarette or the new Second Lieutenant, wet behind the ears who didn’t know squat. And now I am not sure who can I trust here in St. Francis, folks who have never left this valley in their whole life, now mixing with a strung out drug addict?”

“You have me and my dog Deux Slip,” said Father Douboullet .

“I am done with school,” added Sophie. “I am coming home to work with Grandpa”.

“Where would I sleep?” asked Emile.” Do Grandpa and Grandma even know I am here? Where are my parents these days?”

Dr. Meyer rose from her desk and went to stand by Emile. “The three people in this room and you and I Emile, we are the only ones who know you are here or what you have been through. The hospital has prepared a room for you, actually a small apartment with kitchen. It is quite nice. It is up to you and me in the coming days to decide with whom to visit and what story to share. That will be the first stage in the counseling which we can start now. Emile, when was your last fix of heroin?”

“In Boston, in the Greyhound Station, it was by needle, very nice stuff, very expensive. You get what you pay for here in the States.”

“OK” said Dr. Meyer as smoothly as if we were talking about flu shots. “I am going to ask you, Emile, to sign this agreement with the hospital. We will be using a methadone treatment and the close monitoring of your response will be critical.

“Today you will have your first one hour counseling session with me, then a dosage will be administered and you will be closely monitored for the next twelve to sixteen hours. During that time you will not be able to leave the hospital. If all goes well and your response to the therapy is positive, you may leave the hospital for short periods of time. But you will need to have one of these people now in the room with you at all times, I mean all times, even going to the bathroom.”

Dr. Meyer stopped talking and sat back down behind her desk. She then passed Emile the contract. “You break this contract and you’re toast,” she said.

Coming Home

“I am not going to say a thing,” Sophie said as we walked down the Sunset Road toward Grandpa’s barn. Father Jacque was quiet. He had not been here in a while so there would be lots to talk about with Grandpa. The horses looked like they had put on some weight since logging stopped in late March.

“Grandpa must have gone upstream to catch some brook trout,” said Sophie. “They are small now, but hungry.” Father Jacque brought some bales of hay out of the barn and into the afternoon sun and we all three sat down, exhausted.

”Ok, how is this all going to work?” asked the priest. “It was great to see Emile alive but he has always been a tough one to tell what to do. I can see him listen to the doctor but how could we possibly get him to listen to us?”

Just then Grandpa walked down from out of the woods with five trout on a stick. He appeared to me to be a man in his mid-seventies, maybe five feet tall and built like a brick.

“Bon Pap,” said Sophie. Grandpa was very surprised and pleased to see her.

“Ah, bonjour mes chers amis, que faites vous cet apres midi?”

Father Jacque followed in French and I added “Je m’appelle Peter et j’habite pres de Boston”.

“Ah Boston!” he smiled and before he could launch into “what the devil are you doing way up here”. Sophie quickly moved the conversation to how he was getting

as fat as his horses. She told him about her trip to Parkman Lumber and gave him their check for last winter's wood.

Grandma arrived in the Ford and, before you knew it, ploys were on the stove cooking next to grandpa's trout. Jacque kept the conversation rolling in French and I was only able to understand small bits from the Quebecois accent. Sophie would spend the night with them and, before dark, we said good-by and Jacque and I headed back to my car.

As we reached Main Street he said "how would you feel if we drove back to Ft. Kent to check on Emile?" I gave him a smile from the corner of my mouth and said I would drop him at the hospital. I would go to a pay phone to call my parents and tell them where I was.

Father Jacque did not need to introduce himself to the front desk as everyone in the lobby knew who he was. Within seconds, Dr. Meyer was greeting him and inviting him back to her office.

"Would you like a cup of coffee, Father?" she asked. "Yes, that would be lovely," he replied. "and would it be possible if you called me Jacque?"

"Absolutely," she smiled, "as long as you call me Phyllis."

Then Jacque began. "It would be ingenuous of me to say that I have returned this evening to check on Emile. I assume that it is too early to see how he will fit with the program."

"He is sleeping now," she reported. "We gave him 30 mg. of methadone late this afternoon to reduce withdrawal symptoms. Hopefully he will sleep through the

night. We have staff at the bedside to assist if necessary. The next four days will tell us a lot about whether this is a great fit for him or not."

The priest scratched his head self-consciously and then put his glasses away. "I hope that you will not misunderstand this visit but I must admit that I was very impressed with your knowledge of battlefield medicine as well as drug addiction. It is extraordinary for such a remote community anywhere in this country to have such talent at its doorstep."

Dr. smiled. "I might say the same for you, Jacque. You have skills to tame some of the most cynical Christians I have ever had the pleasure to serve. Might I be so bold as to turn this around and ask how you ever got to St. Charles Catholic Church on the banks of the St. John River?"

All at once a deep tremor passed though the priest's body. Beads of sweat ran down his back and his right eye began to twitch. He had allowed himself to be tricked by the beauty and grace of this woman. He felt the trap close on his throat.

Just then the coffee machine rang and the doctor diplomatically rose to fetch two cups. She had seen all his signs and regretted her intrusion. This was her area of expertise and she had used it unfairly to her advantage.

As she returned and handed the cup to a shaking hand she said, "But before you begin, let me give you a little background. My grandparents immigrated to Israel from Western Siberia in the 1930's. Both my parents were born on kibbutzim in the North. I was born there as well. I went to medical school in Tel Aviv and did my service in the Israeli Armed Forces. I married a wonderful man who was killed in June of 1967 during the Six Day War we fought against troops from Egypt,

Syria and Jordan. I was in a medical unit on the Jordanian border. Saul died in the north near Syria. I did not see his body go into the earth."

"I did not think I had the strength to go on. Great people around the world were being killed, Bobby Kennedy and Dr. King. Jews were dying around me and I could not work fast enough or be brave enough to save them all.

"I then had a form of mental breakdown. I fled to America, enrolled in the study of psychiatry in Chicago and somehow ended up here in Maine, a place where there were loggers experiencing a spike in accidents and needing someone to put them back together. No one in the St. John Valley knows this story. I am not sure why I am telling you except that I think that you too might have a story that needs the telling."

By now Jacques was sobbing openly. He did not move from his chair, just shook and cried. Phyllis slowly sipped her coffee. Several minutes later Jacque began.

The Forest

Sophie entered the forest at first light. In spite of his years, Badger was leading the way and took his time crossing the brook and climbing over the rotting wood. They stopped by a tall red spruce approaching 200 years of age, old enough to see Southern slaves pass by on their way to freedom in Canada. Sophie and her cousin Phillipe had climbed to the top branches when they were both seven. Grandpa figured they had been eighty feet high then and scolded them when they came down. But for Sophie the forest was always the safe place where no harm would come. Now she wondered if this might be a place for Emile to heal.

Brun was somewhere around and Badger was on his scent. Sophie was hoping for a sighting. No one had seen the bear since the road crew destroyed his winter den. Emile had a special relationship with Brun. Once when he was four years old and visiting with Phillipe's older sister Claire, Emile had decided it was time to go home and, without telling anyone, headed out through the forest to Grandpa's farm three miles through this very wood. Then there were only animal paths to follow but Emile claimed that Brun had turned up and led him safely home. Every year, on that day, Grannie puts out some bird seed suet for Brun in their backyard apple tree. It is always gone by the following morning.

When Sophie worked in this very forest with the horses, there were times when she could hear them thinking, could catch them looking off into the distant grove at a bird that was no bigger than Sophie's hand. They could tell Sophie when the load was too heavy, when the path was too slippery. She could only hear them when she was focused, living in the present and not worrying about school or where her own

parents were or whatever. Sophie learned from the horses that there was rarely any sense in rushing. But it was a hard lesson for a young woman to learn.

She often found herself remembering these times with Badger, Brun and the horses as she tried to sleep at night at college. Her roommate was from Nashville and needed country and rock and roll to sleep. She had become a good friend but would prefer going out to a club rather than walking in the park.

Sophie and Badger came to a logging yard they had used maybe five years ago to pile logs. There on the far side, sitting on an old stump, was Brun. Badger immediately came running over to be at Sophie's feet. She immediately sat down on a nearby rock and closed her eyes. Bears are like those people who don't like to be looked at directly.

She asked Brun if that really was him. The answer she got back was "yes". Tears came to her eyes.

"Thank you Brun, for coming to see me today. Many years ago when my brother was lost, you walked him home. My brother is again lost but today it is I who need your help. I don't know how to make him well. He has seen people doing bad things and he is sick. What should I do?"

For a long time there was no message. Sophie kept her eyes closed for fear that if she opened them he would be gone. But he was not gone.

"Bring him here to the forest to work with the horses," was his reply.

Bucking Birch

Photo courtesy of the St. Francis Historical Society

Strike

Frank Bouchard had been driving logging trucks his whole life. Born in the Quebec town of Ville Degelis, he had immigrated to Maine as a young man and raised a large family in the St. John Valley. He now owned a small transport company, trucking pulp wood to Frazer Pulp and Paper in Madawaska and logs to the Parkman mill in Ashland. He was standing in the farm yarn when Sophie returned from her visit with Brun. Badger ran up and licked Frank's extended hand.

"Bonjour Frank, ca va?" she smiled. Frank was the critical link between Jack and Jill and Grandpa's lumber checks. But he was also an old family friend and always a welcomed sight.

"Oh, tout va bien . J'ai entendu dire qu'Emile est à la maison avec vous."

"Not exactly, he is living at the hospital." Sophie wondered how Frank knew Emile had come home. "He is recovering from trauma in Vietnam."

"He has come to the right place for that" added Frank. "You know, my cousin George in Connecticut, he has had a complete mental breakdown from the war and he lives in the city. Can you imagine?"

"Can you come in for a cup of coffee?" asked Sophie.

"Oh no, thank you. I saw Gramps earlier and he gave me some tea. Look, the reason I am here is to let you know that some of the truckers are planning a work stoppage at the end of the summer. They will not truck to Fraser in Madawaska

and Irving in Canada. They are upset that these companies are importing Canadian loggers into Maine because they will work for less. They have also hired new managers who are demanding everyone in the mill work on Sundays. The Catholics are furious, as are my Protestant neighbors. This could get ugly."

"Oh Frank, this sounds like the old days when the English speaking families fought the French and they both lost to the mills."

"This time it might be different. Jack Watson and Brian MacBraiety have both joined in. I was down at the Parkman Mill last week and I saw Tom. He knows that you don't normally work in the summer but he is hoping that you could help him out.

"The truckers are now only planning to stop trucking wood for paper, not for lumber. But Rt.161 will certainly be blocked as well at US Rt. One and it will be a mess for all traffic. Tom was hoping that you might get a few loads out before the strike. I know Gramps ain't getting any younger but then I thought about Emile."

Sophie had gone to high school with Irish American kids. In general the Franco-American students came from lower income families who worked for lower wages at "English" owned paper mills. There was certainly some tension.

Sophie could not help smiling at the memory of Emile and his chainsaw. The girl had been from a Scotch Irish family. At Orono, Sophie herself had been dating a student from Boston and she now wondered why she had not yet asked him home to visit.

How would Emile react when this conflict came to town? Would he have flash backs and start shooting? Maybe the best place for him might, as Brun suggested, be here in the woods.

“Grandpa and Grandma have not yet seen Emile. He is confined to the clinic until next week. He will come home then and we will talk about all this. Thanks you for coming by. Emile is no stranger to hard work. Maybe that is just what will make him well’.

“Que Dieu soit d’accord,” he smiled and headed home.

For more on the strike

https://www.mainepublic.org/post/listen-story-strike-fraser-paper

The Kill

Folks from St. Francis soon learned that if they needed their priest, they could now most quickly find him at the Fort Kent Hospital. Word was out that Emile was home from the war but not having visitors yet. This included immediate family. I think that Grandpa and Grandma understood but Emile's parents were strangely absent. Father Jacque was staying with Emile during the day, occasionally going to the store and taking a few walks in the evening. I slept in a cot in his room at night.

I thought about calling home and saying I would be away for a while longer but I was not sure anyone would care. Except maybe for a woman I had visited that first afternoon in Cambridge. So I called Marty and told her that I had a friend up in Maine who was in the hospital that needed my help. She understood but I don't think she was clear why I was calling her. I certainly wasn't.

The methadone was administered twice daily. It seemed to help his mood but kept him up at night. So we talked a lot. On our third night together, Emile shared with me this story.

"My platoon had been dropped into the Quảng Trị Province, forty klicks south of the border with North Vietnam. It was a small hamlet, no more than thirty huts and a few fields. We set up our outpost on the edge of the village and were supplied by chopper every two to three days. Our job was to monitor enemy traffic through the area. 'The days are yours; the nights are ours' was our understanding with the villagers. So we tried to sleep in the day and stay alive in the night.

“After two weeks of reconnaissance patrols we began to relax a bit, even started to play with the village children. One day while visiting their small village school, I picked up a thin book. As I held it in my hands and opened its pages, I could not believe what was happening. I could read. The words were in French and they accompanied photos of different exotic birds of Vietnam.

“Ah, mon dieu,” I muttered. ‘And the teacher, an old woman with only a few stained teeth, answered back “Avez vous un question’

“This was unbelievable, we could converse. I once had I a conversation with a Vietnamese woman at a restaurant in Saigon. And all she wanted was my order, in English. Now I could speak French with this Vietnamese teacher and I didn’t know how to begin.”

“How old are you?” I started. “Older than you,” she smiled.

“Why do you speak French?” I asked.

“Because when I was a child in school, the French ruled our country and forced us to learn their language. I was punished if I spoke Vietnamese.”

“You know,” I replied,” when I was a child in school I too was punished, except it was for speaking French. The nuns made me speak English. My name is Emile.”

“Enchantez de faire votre connaissance, Emile. My name is Marie and I am 52 years old.

Our company Sargent was on his second tour in country and had told us to keep our distance from the villagers. But I could not stay away.

“Several days later I was invited to her class. The kids were between six and twelve years of age. Their teacher translated from French to Vietnamese. At first they were shy but soon they were asking all kinds of questions, like did I have a dog, what did snow feel like, did I have a wife. And when I said no, I was not married, they all laughed and one asked ‘why not?’

“The following week something horrible happened. I am still unable to talk about it even to this day. But in its aftermath, I started taking heroin. If it were not for the methadone, I would start shaking now.”

While Emile was telling his story, I started doing the math and realized that I, too, had been in I-Corp province during that same time period, about 40 miles from Quảng Trị. We had this meeting in Da Nang. He and I had flown back to the States just days apart and here we were now bunking in the same room. Where was this all going?

I felt reluctant to share any of my stories with Emile as there was no comparison as to what he had experienced. My flight had taken me from Tokyo to San Francisco to Boston. I arrived home on a bright fall day completely exhausted. All three airports had been filled with servicemen going to or coming back from the war.

I went to my bank in Cambridge to get some cash only to be told that I had taken all my money with me to Vietnam. I visited my brother who was in his third year at Harvard who gently informed me that our parents were super pissed that I had been out of touch for so many months.

I had met Marty just before leaving the states and she really caught my eye. My brother now gave me her address and, for some reason, I headed on foot to her

house not far from Radcliffe College. She was an art student living in university cooperative housing.

As I walked into North Cambridge and Radcliffe College there seemed to be an anti-war presence on every corner. There was a large protest in process on the Cambridge Common with the city police force strategically positioned on the side streets. But when I arrived at Marty's address, no one was home. It was a warm fall day so I lay down on the front porch with my gunny sack under my head and went into a deep sleep. When I awoke it was evening. The front door was open and I could see several college aged students in the kitchen cooking supper. I wondered what they had thought as they earlier passed my unconscious body.

"Hey, come on in," they smiled as I peeked into the kitchen.

"I'm looking for Marty. Is she around?"

"Not yet, she's still at school. But why don't you cut up some onions while you're waiting and have supper with us?" and two students with hair down to their butts made room for me at the cutting board."

I had cut just enough onions to get my eyes running when she walked into the kitchen, looked over at me and saw the tears on my cheeks.

"Oh my God," she uttered. My welcome home was very different from Emile's.

Early the next morning, just before the sun shone through our hospital window, I awoke in my cot to find Emile sitting on his bed, looking out the window. The wind was blowing down from the north and giving this spring morning the feel of fall. I told him about the onions and the 'oh, my God' and he started laughing. It

was my first time seeing him not struggling with his pain. He reached over into his duffle bag and handed me a small book, ragged and worn. It was in French and was covered with pictures of colorful birds. He then lay down and drifted into a deep sleep.

Jack and Jill

Alan Cloutier came by Grandpa's farm early the next morning to put new shoes on the team. Sophie set me up with a curry comb and brush.

"This is not about cleaning the horse," she said. "It is about showing them that you care. They can feel the difference." And she began with long and gentle strokes and a dialog in French I could not understand. "They know when your mind is here and when it is far away. They can't imagine why you would leave."

The harness was made of leather and so heavy I could barely throw it over their backs. Sophie walked me through the drill, the brushing first, then the collar followed by the harness, then the bit and bridle followed by the team reins. It took me a week to get it down.

Grandpa had the forge going so Alan could bend and fit the shoes. When they had cooled, he nailed them on. The whole time Alan was talking to the horses and I could strangely tell they were listening.

"Bon ami," he would say when they picked up their feet and "mon cheri" when he was finished. Before Alan left, he showed me how to clean their soles of mud and pebbles. I joked with Father Jacque that we were now in the same business (soles v. souls) but I don't think he got it.

Emile and I would wake each morning around five, drive to the diner for a quick cup of coffee and check on Grandma, then off to the farm for bacon and eggs with Gramps and Sophie while the horses ate their oats, corn and hay. After breakfast

Gramps would head up into the woodlot first to mark the trees to be cut as Sophie and I harnessed the team. I would then take them up and down the road, first on foot with just the reins and then, when I felt confident, riding on the scoot.

We would load the saws and gas and oil on the scoot and by eight a.m. Emile would have the first tree on the ground. I would drive the team up into the woods to that tree and hook a chain to its butt end. When Emile was finished cutting off all the branches, the team would lean forward and twitch it, in its entirety, out to the yard. There were cases when the tree was so big that it came out only when cut into sections.

I learned how to tell when I was asking too much of the horses. Alan Cloutier had said, "Son, go light and often and they will pull for you all day." I never felt rushed. I would arrive in a clearing along the woods road where Sophie would measure and cut the logs to length and then help me roll them up on the scoot. When we had a full load I would hook the team to the sled and drag it down to the log yard. I would knock a pin out of one or two of the four upright bunks and the whole load would crash down onto the ground where Frank could load them on his truck. The hope was that I would never end up at the bottom of the pile.

My job was also to be checking on Emile to see how he was holding up chopping in the woods. This way I would see Emile every thirty minutes or so when he helped me load the scoot. Grandpa purchased a second chain saw which Sophie was now using to ease the harvesting pressure on Emile. Grandpa was keeping an eye on my every move and was a vital teacher.

"So when we go into the forest each season we must first look around before we begin cutting. How damp is the soil? We don't want the scoot or the logs to be

cutting into it if it is too wet. It is best if the ground is frozen.We then look up at the branches, what we call the ‘canopie’ in French. We need some light to come down but not too much. Then we select the trees we will cut. When they land on the ground we take a moment to thank them for all they have given us and ask them for forgiveness that we must end their lives.”

I watched as Emile and his thirty pound chain saw cut through a stump and felt the forest as the tree crashed to the ground. Then Grandpa counted the rings and measured the age of the tree.

“This is a red spruce and it is eighty years old. We have some spruce here over 200 years old. They will never be cut. We treat them like they are our ancestors.”

At first Emile could only work the saw for a short while before he needed a break. He would often leave the saw running as it required such a strong pull to start. Beads of sweat ran down his shirt as he sat in the shade, trying to catch his breath. But the weather stayed cool for July and we were able to get three loads a week for Frank. Dr. Meyer was still keeping close tabs on her patient’s physical and mental progress. But what most impressed her was the effect that the forest was having over him.

“I saw Brun today over by the oaks,” he would tell her during their sessions. “He made like he was looking for nuts but he was really watching me, telling me that my sweat was sweeter smelling by the day.” This was becoming the new normal for the now weekly therapy sessions and Dr. Meyer often found herself smiling. I, for one, was no stranger to talking animals. My first chance came in May, 1956 in Cohasset, in the town where I was born. I was ten.

Bud

I climbed down from the school bus on a hot spring afternoon and made my way up the dirt driveway to the yellow farm house where my family and I would be spending the next six months. I was looking forward to the day when my fifth grade class would soon sing its last song and said good-by to school for the summer. My neck was sunburned and I felt very frustrated and alone.

There were no cars in the turn around, only an old draft horse named Bud out grazing in the field. Dad would still be at his furniture factory and mom probably shopping for supper. Yesterday I had fallen asleep on Bud's sway back and gotten the sunburn. When Bud saw me, he turned in the opposite direction, stopping by the ice pond and looked back over his shoulder as I approached. I gave him a dusty pat on his butt and led him to a nearby stone wall where I climbed up and jumped. Bud stood very still and when I was on board he carefully stepped back into the tall grass just in case I fell. I then stretched out with my head on his rump and my sneakers resting on both sides of his neck. As we slowly walked across the field, I felt my young body bend and curve with Bud's. Then I started my story.

"So this kid who is always bullying me, he sits right behind me in school and when the teacher is not looking he jams my chair forward with his feet so I can't move. I have tried to be nice to him but he won't stop. I told my dad I just wanted to pop him one on the playground but he was against that idea."

Bud and I made our way over to the giant white oak where a light breeze always seemed to blow through the branches even on the hottest day.

"So what are you going to do?"

My eyes were shut when I heard the question. Actually I had not heard the question as much as felt it. I smiled. "Bud, are you a talking horse?" I said out loud to no one in particular. Bud remained silent.

But as the spring turned to summer and school ended, Bud and I walked over the farm's hay fields and I told him all my secrets. Only Bud, the birds and the leaves in the trees heard my voice. Farmer White's wife had told me never to swim in the Ice Pond but that was impossible on those hot summer days. One afternoon she saw me swimming and hid my clothes. Bud led me to the hiding place.

Farmer White lived with his wife Neillie and son Frank in the woods not far from where my family and I were staying. He hired me that summer to clean out the horse stalls in the morning and harness the big team, Bud and Bill, for haying in the afternoon. One morning, shortly after school was let out for the summer, Farmer White harnessed Bud up to a small, single horse wagon, with a seat.

"Now today I want you to go down to Sandy Beach and pick up any seaweed that has washed ashore from last night's storm and spread it on the hay fields. Here is a pitch fork. Bud knows the way. Head back when you have a full load".

So off we went down Jerusalem Road, then Nichols Road and pretty soon I could hear the waves breaking in the distance. As we reached Atlantic Avenue, I looked over at my regular home, under repair after a bad winter storm.

I kissed Bud up over the sand dunes and down to the water's edge. The storm had washed the seaweed up to the high tide mark and beachgoers had to make their

way through it before they could dive into the waves. I climbed down and began loading the wagon. Every once and a while I looked up at my ocean home. I had been so upset when my family first told that we would have to leave for the summer. Then I looked over at Bud. “You know Bud, I don’t miss it that much anymore.” Bud turned his head and nickered at me and sure enough, along came Jud, the kid from school.

“Hey you!” Jud said, “What are you doing here?”

“Cleaning up the beach,” I replied.

“It don’t figure. Your dad has his own furniture factory in town and you live up in that big house on the rocks. Seems like you should be out playing tennis or sailing a yacht.”

Just then Bud turned his head over towards Jud and let out a big sigh which made Jud step back.

“It’s ok,” I said. “His name is Bud. He’s a good guy. Go scratch him between the ears. He loves that.”

“I don’t know. I ain’t been around too many horses.” But Jud slowly put his hands on Bud’s forehead and began scratching as I continued pitching the seaweed up onto the wagon.

“That feels good” Bud smiled. Soon the wagon was full and I took the reins and turned Bud up and over the dunes and down onto Nichols Road. “Have a good summer,” I said to Jud. But Jud ran to fetch his bicycle and, together, the three of us made their way back up Nichols Road toward White’s Farm.

Emile's Progress

Most days Jacque and Deux Slip would show up around ten and meet us up in the wood yard with coffee from Grandma and we would enjoy a civilized lunch early in the afternoon. The language of the crew was French and if I broke all the pronunciation lessons I had learned at Milton and Harvard, I found I could go all day with no English.

On Wednesdays, Dr. Meyer would drop by to check on Emile's 'field progress' as she called it. She seemed to enjoy picking up Jacque on the way and she often brought an exotic mid-eastern tasting lunch as an offering. We would work 'till four, put away the gear, feed the horses and wash up in time for Grandma's supper. By the time we arrived back at the hospital in the evening, Emile and I would be totally exhausted. On the one hand, he now had no trouble sleeping through his nightly dose. On the other, he worried that he was missing the strength of his body he was so used to enjoying and wondered aloud if the heroin had done him permanent damage.

"You know, you are my first methadone patient," assured Dr. Meyer, "and all signs point to your thriving in the forest work."

After his shot Emile would sit in our room at the edge of his bed with his head between his knees and wondered aloud if he had the strength for another day in the woods, if he would ever live a normal life, find a partner, forget about the war and move on. "I am not like Sophie, not like Grandpa. They are at home in the forest. Now I have no home."

Everett

The sound of the rotors first came from the jungle south of the Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon. A Bell "Huey" helicopter with a pilot from Cleveland, co-pilot from Texas, and side gunners from the Bronx and Tallahassee, dropped out of the sky and hovered two feet above the ground. Bronx leaned out over the landing struts, grabbed my arm and hauled me aboard.

"Where to sir?" yelled the pilot over the roar of the engine.
"Long Bihn Jail," I replied with a return salute. He smiled.

The helicopter rose up over the jungle and lurched forward and soon the smell of weed drifted through the cabin. I was offered a toke but respectfully declined.

Everett was waiting for me in an interview room that was thankfully air conditioned. As I came through the door, he chose not to rise and kept his gaze to the floor. This was my first pre-trial interview for the Lawyers Military Defense Committee. I pulled out some papers and nervously shuffled them.

My contact with people of color had been limited over the years though it was not without my attempts. Between my graduation from a predominantly white (one black student) boarding school and then Harvard, I had been playground director in Roxbury, a black community in Boston. I enjoyed the parents, and survived their children. I had requested a person from the South as a Harvard roommate and was surprised to find Conway Augustus Downing sitting on our couch the day I arrived at my dorm. It took time for both of us to warm to each other.

After graduation, my first duty station was an ROTC unit at the primarily all-black Prairie View A&M in East Texas. I designed a course called Afro American History in the US Military. The seminal text was Julius Lester's "Look out Whitey, Black Power's going to get your Mama". After four months teaching in the Texas summer heat, anti-war demonstrators burned a sizeable hunk of the college to the ground during homecoming. There was never any hard evidence as to my curriculum's involvement.

From the Deep South and not yet eighteen, the judge had offered Everett Vietnam or two years in the county jail for stealing a car. He had taken Vietnam. Everett was now up on charges of murder in the first degree of his first lieutenant.

"Everett, my name is Peter Hagerty. I am not at present a member of the military. I am here as part of a legal defense team. We have been granted a retrial of your case but in order for us to move ahead, I need to ask you some questions. No one outside of this room will hear your answers. We just need to know what happened from your point of view. If you really did shoot your lieutenant, then we would approach your defense in one way. If you tell me you never pulled the trigger, we would take another route."

Everett looked at the floor for what seemed like forever before he began talking.

Coming Home Atlantic Avenue

Fall 1970

After the third week on Grandpa's logging crew, I decided to visit my parents. I had not talked with them since a quick phone call from San Francisco the morning of my return stateside. There was a planned three day break from logging for St. Charles' summer fair the upcoming weekend so, with Dr. Weber's blessing, I drove to the Houlton Airport and caught their early and only Eastern Airlines flight south to Boston. There I took the afternoon bus to my home town and walked the last few miles.

It had been a long time since I had been down Jerusalem Road on foot. I passed by the yellow farm house where we had lived when I was ten. Back then there were fewer cars on the road and Bud the talking horse and I could make several trips a day hauling seaweed home from the beach to the garden. I realized that I had forgotten the role that Bud played in my early years and how time with him had more recently helped me, learning the ropes with Jack and Jill.

By some miracle, Dad was cutting brush in the front yard when I walked in. If a face could become confused, angry, then happy, all at the same time, so did his. He threw down his brush cutters, rubbed his eyes, muttered "thank God" and, for the first time I could remember, hugged me in his sweaty arms. "Oh, my god, we were so worried. For weeks we heard nothing."

We stood in the front yard for one hour and we did not move. He asked me questions and I answered as best I could. I began to realize how unaware he was of the limitations of communicating with a war zone. I had sent mail home with friends but the letters never arrived. I remembering arranging a phone for our Saigon office but found it was only for local calling. Apparently word had reached

home that I had hosted a controversial planning session for a demonstration in downtown Saigon where US military officers protested in uniform. Apparently Pulitzer Prize winner Francis Fitzgerald from The New York Times had attended. After her story hit page one, a bunch of folks suddenly wanted to chat with me. But I was out in the bush, nowhere to be found, missing in action. Mom and dad began to wonder if I were still alive.

I told dad about Emile, about Everett, but fell short of accurately depicting what it was really like over there. Both my parents had been so relieved when my 'career' in the Navy ended, then outraged when I decided to go to Vietnam on my own. Now Dad just stood there, tears on his cheeks. I realized that the only time I had seen him cry was when his own mother died. Mom arrived home from market, flipped out, raged around the house for a while, finally calmed down and began cooking supper.

This was not an uncommon way for our family to work through issues. But that night I had some insights into how I was changing. For the first time, I took responsibility for a part of my folks' pain. I could have done a better job staying in touch. Also I was deeply touched by my dad's emotionalism at my homecoming. I now felt closer to him than ever before.

We went for a quick sail before dinner. As I watched Dad navigate between the rocks and the beach I floated a spontaneous idea.

"Dad, I know you have a lot going on, but I could use your help. I was wondering if you would come back with me on the plane tomorrow. We would pick up my car in Houlton and visit Tom Parkman in Ashland, then drive up to St. Francis, meet

Grandpa and the crew, get a sense of what we are facing. It would be great for you to introduce me to Mr. Parkman."

Even as the idea came out of my mouth I saw how unreasonable it was. Dad ran a furniture factory with twelve employees as well as an office staff. But there had been previous spontaneous adventures we had enjoyed together. I chose this moment to recall one.

"Do you remember when you and I went up to the Shelburne Hardwood Mill in Vermont and we saw all the workers playing polo during lunch, riding Morgan ponies around a hay field and using mallets they made from the maple in their shop to whack the balls through the opposing goals.

"And you called George Scott at the Myopia Hunt Club and you challenged him to a polo match. And he laughed at the idea. But those guys came down with their homegrown horses and beat the pants off the club."

At first I thought he was too caught up checking the wind or the tide to have heard me, for he was totally quiet. I am sure that there had been days when he thought we would never again be sailing together or heading out on a spontaneous adventure. Then a smile drifted over his unshaven chin.

"My foreman Paul Young could run the show for a few days. Things are slow this time of year."

And the next morning after an early mass at St. Anthony's, we were flying north towards the St. John's Valley. An hour after landing we drove up to Parkman Lumber's in Ashland. Just one vehicle, a beat up '53 Ford pickup, was parked in front of the main office.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” a white haired man my father’s age shouted from his desk. “Ain’t you Irish Catholics supposed to be in church?”

“No Tom, we are supposed to be out and about trying to save all you Congregationists.”

Tom Parkman jumped out of his chair like a man half his age and gave my dad a bear hug. I had never seen another man, even one of my uncles, hug my dad like that.

“So Francis, what in God’s name brings you up here, unannounced?”

“Tom, I would like you to meet my son Peter, now a teamster in training, apparently hauling out logs for your outfit. I thought you two should meet.”

“Look,” he reflected, “I think I hear what might be an interesting story so let me call Virginia and we can all enjoy it over Sunday lunch.”

As we all ate the roast beef, potatoes and asparagus from the garden, I asked Tom to tell Dad and me about his family history with Gramps, Sophie and Emile.

“You know Frannie, my dad logged with a team of horses all his life and so did his dad. At first I thought this new machinery was the saving grace, but now I am not so sure. Sophie keeps me on the straight and narrow. Her generation will make the difference whether the north woods is saved or decimated.”

“I’m not saying that we should go back to the horse and plow. But this mill has survived by advocating for a healthy and sustainable forest. We want Cohasset Colonials to have the best ‘pumpkin pine’ available. But to sell the best we need to grow, and sometimes even save, the best trees.

“As Sophie reminded me last month, talking about a mechanical crew in her neighborhood that was doing some poor work, ‘with a horse you go around, with a machine you go over.’ I think that is as relevant today and it was in Grandpa’s time. Please give her family our best. We are so proud of her.

“And about Emile, I have friends that came home from the war in Europe and they were never the same again. But I think that Emile and his family can get through this. Most folks up there don’t know that Sophie’s Gramps fought in World War Two along with my brother.

“They saw horrible things but they came home, went to work with the horses, the most honest four legged partners you could have when you need to grieve, and you do that in the privacy of the forest with the birds singing and the bears roaming and the fish jumping…..”

“Oh Tom,” chimed in his wife with a caring voice “you can be so romantic.”

“Fran,” Tom replied, “I know you are a busy man but you need to see the show up there. They are back to work tomorrow. Why don’t we all meet at the Forget Me Not, say at seven? I’ve got to get some money to Gramps and you can see where your table tops come from.”

I had taken the liberty of keeping Jacque posted on my progress north and when I called and said I had my dad with me, he said he would make up another bed in the rectory. I myself needed to bunk with Emile that night but Jacque said not to worry; he would take care of my dad. I knew that Dad was pleased that I had befriended a Catholic priest. They were chatting away when I later left and drove

back to Fort Kent and the hospital. I found Emile sitting on his bed, wide awake and talkative. Sophie had stayed overnight with him during my trip south.

“How was the church fair?” I asked.

“Oh it was ok, my parents showed up. It was kind of awkward. They didn’t want to talk about stuff, just made believe that nothing had happened, like I had never left the valley. That’s their way I guess. They have moved down to grandma’s folks’ farm in Presque Isle to work for the summer. Did I hear Sophie say that your dad might be coming up here?”

“Yeah, he is here now sleeping at Father Jacque’s tonight. He is looking forward to meeting you and seeing how you run the chain saw. He’s old school, only a cross cut and axe for him.”

“Oh man,” he laughed. “The real deal.”

Fragging

It was deathly silent inside the interview cell. Every once and a while a chopper would pass over. Everett had smoked all his cigarettes and had thrown the crumbled pack on the floor in the corner.

“The lieutenant beckoned me over when we found the cave entrance,” he began. “Come here boy,” he ordered. “I was the only colored soldier in the platoon.” I didn’t move.

“You,’ he said, ‘get your fat ass over here.’

“I walked over and stood in front of the tunnel. ‘I want you to go down there and find any gooks if there are any. Any doubts, throw in a grenade.’

“I was some scared, like I had trouble going into an empty room at night, much less a tunnel. But I got down on my knees for this racist cracker and made my way in. I had a flashlight and one grenade. It was too tight to bring a weapon. It was too tight to turn around. Soon the tunnel sloped downhill. I knew that if I went downward I might not be able to turn around and crawl out. I slowed my rapid breathing and listened.

“Far below me I heard something like a motor running. I pulled the grenade pin and threw it down over the edge, then struggled backward to get out. The blast was thunderous. I panicked when the roof of the tunnel collapsed on me. I could not move, dust filled my lungs and I began to scream. All at once I went shooting backwards. Two of my buddies, one after the other and against the Lieutenant’s orders, crawled in after me. The first one made it to my boots and grabbed on, the second yanked and pulled both of us out.

“That night there was a meeting, a private one. Later, during a firefight, the lieutenant was shot in the back of the head by an M-16 round. We had decided not to draw straws. We all just shot in his direction so no one knows if it was his bullet that killed him”

I was accused because the Army said I had the most reason. I think the court found me guilty because I was black.”

Breakfast at the Forget Me Not

Emile and I awoke at dawn and went for a short walk in the forest behind the hospital before heading down to St. Francis. His physical strength had pretty much recovered and he was able to run the chain saw in excess of four hours, staying well ahead of Grandpa and Sophie. His nightmares had dropped off and he was often able to sleep all night. Doctor Meyer was pleased with his progress and they had even joined other Vietnam vets returning home for an evening of reflection.

I introduced Emile to my dad in the parking lot at St. Charles and along with Father Jacque, we headed down to the Forget Me Not. When we entered the diner, I was surprised to see such a huge crowd, some talking French, others English. It was not yet seven and two tables pushed together were not enough to seat everybody. Tom Parkman apparently knew everyone there, in fact, had made some phone calls to bring this gathering about.

Grandpa's trucker, Frank Bouchard, was bringing the crowd up to date on day two of the strike at Fraser Paper's Madawaska Mill, wondering aloud if both French and English workers would hold together or not. Mark heard that the plan was to block all roads to and from the mill and to stop all freight trains from hauling any paper out to market. State and local police would be present today to make sure this didn't happen. Emile listened closely for this was all news to him. All this talk brought back his basketball days and the cultural tensions that existed in school and on the court.

And pulpwood trucker Chuck Renard reported in on the health of Monica's baby he had delivered on one of these very tables less than a month past. Tom, meanwhile, was introducing my dad to everyone within reach. Sophie was back in

the kitchen helping Grandma and did not have a chance to meet my dad till meal's end. Grandpa was back at the farm doing morning chores.

We left the cars at the diner and made our way on foot out the Sunset Road. Badger had taken a liking to my dad and was often rewarded with a scratch on the head. Dad was using this time talking with Sophie, describing summers working with his friend and neighbor Dick White, sawing white pine during the early days of his furniture business. But he had no experience managing a woodlot. I was so proud of him. He was much older that Sophie yet there was no condensation in his questions.

"You know Mr. Hagerty", I overheard Sophie say, "I am very excited to take you into our woodlot. You are the first end user that I have had the pleasure to meet. But thanks to my grandparents and their parents before them, it has never been about the end product, like the pumpkin pine logs we cut or the boards Mr. Parkman sells you or even the family that makes their dining room table from your Cohasset Colonial kits. What I want to show you is the unique partnership that has formed over the years between the St. Johns Valley woodcutters and the trees they cut. The health of this forest environment and the surrounding community are both far richer because of this partnership." And with that Sophie, Dad and Badger disappeared down a path into the dark forest.

We heard Jack and Jill's 'nickering' before we reached the farm yard. Mark bid 'adieu' but said he would return after lunch for one final load before the strike shut the road and Jacque needed to visit a parishioner recovering from an operation in Fort Kent, so they both headed back to the Diner.

Emile was excited to show Tom his new chainsaw from Finland so Grandpa and I harnessed the team, hooked onto the scoot and headed out into the woods for our first hitch. I joined Emile for a coffee break early afternoon.

“How are you doing, mon ami?” I smiled. “Well, I was a complete wreck the entire time you were gone!” He then laughed. “No, seriously the treatment is going well. I have cut back the dosage and should be off within a couple of weeks. I stayed alone at night and slept soundly. I did miss your teeth grinding.”

Sophie and Dad crossed the Petit Brook Bridge and soon they were deep in a section of the forest last cut when Sophie was just a child. Sophie was walking along and talking when she realized that she was alone. Looking back, she saw Dad standing stone still, looking up into the forest leaf canopy.

“I have never seen anything like this,” Dad announced. Sophie remained quiet, letting all the sounds of the forest do their magic. “I would not believe this if I had not seen it myself, he went on. “These white pines, red oaks and red spruce must be over a century old.”

“You know Mr. Hagerty,” Sophie began but was interrupted by Dad.

“Please Sophie, call me Frannie.”

“”Well Frannie,” she began tentatively, “these trees are what we call ‘Arbres Patrimoniaux’. I am about to graduate from U. Maine Forestry School, and down at Orono, they call them Heritage Trees. We allow these trees to live beyond 200 years to protect the forest floor and to clear up all the polluted air that we humans are introducing into the atmosphere.

“For every tree we cut for you, we keep three of equal or larger size to grow forever. We have over three hundred contiguous acres here which my family, God willing, will continue to manage this way over the next century. These logs of ours will only grow more valuable. We have no desire to get rich, only provide meaningful work for our family, friends and horses. You are looking at a healthy forest. If you could stay with us for a few weeks, you might well meet Bruno the Black Bear and his extended family up close. In my short life experience, that kind of miracle only happens in the heart of a healthy forest. This cathedral of trees is where extraordinary interactions between humans and wild animals can take place. But only if your soul is open.

“There may be violence today at Fraser because profits and greed are at work. Last year they forced the workers to work on Sundays. That had never happened before. They are raping the forests across the river in Quebec and only a few ‘Arbres Patrimoniaux’ survive. There are almost no wild animals to visit in the North because there are few cathedrals or open souls left.

“I am sorry, I am sounding morose. This is a beautiful place and it is an honor to spend time here with you. I want to show you more”. And they moved on.

Strike in the Jungle

Mark arrived after lunch and loaded perhaps the last pine logs till it snowed. Sophie would soon leave for her last year in Orono and Grandpa would have more time to spend in the garden. Emile cleaned his new saw and stored it in the woodshed, washed his hands and face and patted good-by to the horses.

“Mark, can I get a ride to Ft. Kent?” and before you could say Jack Robinson Emile and Mark were down the road, leaving a trail of dust in their wake. The load was a big one as no logs were left on the yard. They stopped for a quick cup of coffee and a ‘good-by’ to Grandma. By the time they reached Emile’s hospital, the traffic had slowed to a crawl. The local NPR radio station was broadcasting live from the strike site and the news was not good. French and non-French speakers were yelling obscenities, you could hear people coughing from the tear gas and the background church bells could be heard tolling.

“My God,” said Mark. It sounds like hell!”

“I need to go get something in my room,” announced Emile. “If you need to move, go ahead. If you are still here, I’ll jump back on. But don’t wait for me.”

Mark had known Emile forever. He had heard stories from other Vietnam vets about the difficulties coming home but not much from Emile. They had been friends since childhood as Mark’s dad had hauled Grandpa’s logs back then. He had seen Emile’s violent side but had to smile at the memory of their High School Sadie Hawkins dance. His truck was going nowhere fast and Emile soon returned with a duffle bag.

“No rifle in there?” Mark asked with a smile. “No rifle,” Emile replied and they continued to listen to Maine Public Radio.

"Trouble started in the mill back in 1968 when tough new managers were brought in to push for workers concessions. They demanded that Sunday be a work day. This was particularly hard for the Catholic workers and Fraser was accused of trying to divide the employees. None of the new managers spoke French.

"The month long strike got more heated this morning as local church bells, Catholic and Protestant, began ringing before dawn, signally that trains, filled with paper, were preparing to leave the mill for markets in Canada. State police arrived in large numbers but not before strikers and families, including many children, ran out of their homes and laid down on the railroad tracks. When police tried to remove them, pandemonium broke out. Several cruisers were overturned and lit on fire. More acts of violence are expected as crews search for bombs."

Mark and Emile could see the smoke from Madawaska in the distance. They were directed off Main Street onto Fox and crossed through town. On 14th Street, Emile turned to Mark.

"Mark, I have to get out. Don't worry, I have been in some tight situations recently and got through just fine. I think I can be of help here. I will catch you later. Merci pour tout." And he jumped down.

Emile had lived in Madawaska for two years when his Dad was going to AA so he knew his way around. The high school parking lot was empty but he found a door open into the gym. He quickly took off his logging clothes and put on his Marine Corp dress blues. He had only worn them twice before. But for some reason, unlike his combat clothes, he had brought them home. He smiled at the spit shine on his shoes. He then left the gym and headed down to the mill.

State and county police were on every street corner. People were milling around a tire fire, there were tables of food and soda and people were spending time talking with the police, trying to keep them calm. Emile smiled at this role reversal. Down over the hill by the river you could see smoke spilling skyward. The U.S-Canada border bridge was closed and a large crowd of strikers had assembled on the Canadian side. The radio announcer had suggested that, if trains began to move, protestors were going to lie down on the railroad bridge spanning the river as well.

Emile made his way down the hill. At first some folks took him to be police with his dress blues and hat with visor but then they saw he was a vet and started thanking him for his service. He confidently walked through perimeter lines and returned salutes from fellow uniformed folks. Emile was on a mission that he had designed at the Diner only that morning. He knew Madawaska, knew the temperament of the folks and knew what he had to do.

As he approached the railroad yard, he saw two train engines overturned, spilling fuel and water into the river and thick smoke into the air. Nearby was the railroad bridge that spanned the St. John's River into Canada. That was the weak link. That is where it would be. He broke into a run.

He could smell the jungle, hear the Bell Hueys coming in low over the tree tops, looking for the wounded. Where was his combat vest, where was his gun? Tom Gallagher, now dead three months, came up behind him.

"Watch for the trip wire" Tom whispered. "It will be in the middle of the train bridge." Then Emile saw the people, the women and children. They were starting to cross and there were no customs agents to stop them. He yelled for them to go back but they would not listen.

“The Viet Cong will shoot from the left bank of the river and force you to look into the sun,” Tom yelled.

Then he saw it, tucked under one of the railroad bridge pilings about half way across. Was it tripped or fused? He could not see. Enemy fire suddenly came from across the river but their aim was off, missing him by a large margin. He broke into a run but not ten feet away he stumbled and fell, the bare skin of his arms tearing at the creosote of the railroad ties. Had he been hit?

Crawling forward, he grabbed the bomb in his hands and rolled off the bridge and down into the churning rapids. Several seconds later an explosion rocked the town. The bridge shook but did not fall. John Pierce was in the crowd’s lead and was on NPR that night.

“He had yelled for us, in French and English, to turn back, that there was a bomb. But I could not stop the crowd.” John had fought in Korea and he recognized the Marine Corps dress blues as they hit the water and floated down the St. John’s toward the ocean, over two hundred miles away.

Jacque and Dad

It was late afternoon before Dad and Sophie returned to the farm. They had dined in the forest on wild strawberries, Indian cucumber and wintergreen but Grandpa still had the team hitched so we all rode to the Diner for supper. By then Frank had called to tell of the bomb explosion and how the people and the bridge had been saved by a vet weaving Marine dress blues. He had, by then, also figured out who the hero was. NPR was reporting that Maine's Federal Labor Commissioner was projecting that "this strike might contain the most violent episodes of organized worker dissent in Maine's labor history".

Dr. Meyer and Father Dubolais showed up while we were eating to round out the picture. Dr. Meyer explained that hers and Emile's therapy had reached a critical stage but she could not discuss this with us. I, myself, was not surprised that he could have committed such a courageous act, but as a Catholic, I also saw it as a convenient way to have past sins forgiven, especially if surviving had not been an option. Tom Parkman had left earlier in the afternoon but Dad declined a ride to the airport and said he wanted to help find Emile.

Father DuBolais entered the chapel the next morning sometime after three A.M. when he saw the altar light shining through the church window. There was Dad, sitting up in the first pew saying the rosary. The priest sank quietly into one of the back rows. When Dad stood, then genuflected and kissed his beads, he realized he was not alone and turned.

"I have been praying that Emile is alive," Dad said, somewhat self-consciously. "But perhaps that is selfish, that God has a different plan for Emile. Have you ever lost someone close to you and asked God about it?"

Jacque did know where to start. But he knew that he had been waiting years for this very moment when he could finally talk with someone who might understand, someone who was Catholic, someone from far away.

“Well Frannie,” he began and was just finishing as the sun was coming up in the east.

Emile and Brun

Emile awoke in the dark, knowing he had a head wound. He was lying on a beach and he could hear the wind behind him in a forest. He could not remember why he was here but that did not matter. He was alive. He felt the dried blood in his hair but there was no fresh blood in his fingers. He had a shirt on, pants and a good set of boots. It was a warm evening and he could stand up. He would find a path and move inland.

He knew that he needed to move west and stay away from houses and roads. There was a full moon to guide him. If he walked on the logging roads, he would find his way home, wherever that might be. He moved all his fingers, then counted them. They were all there. Why should that be such a surprise?

He walked for hours, found a clearing, and then lay down. Though exhausted, he felt better when he glimpsed Tom setting up a perimeter watch. He was safe and could now drift off into a deep sleep, knowing that the squad was awake and watching. Brun was also out there somewhere, ready to show the way home.

The Church

Jacque talked and Dad listened until the sun came up and there was a knock on the church door and the priest left. Voices drifted through the sacristy where they had been sitting and Jacque returned with tears in his eyes. Dad wondered if they were connected to what had been said or what was now happening.

“Emile is in trouble. He threw a bomb off the rail bridge that had been planted by someone else to stop the trains and, in so doing, saved many lives. But he fell into the St. John’s and is missing and feared dead. But this tragedy had stopped the violence at the mill. Management met with labor in emergency session early this morning and has agreed to major concessions. Emile is being portrayed as a hero.”

Jacque and Dad headed to the diner and an overflowing parking lot. Mark was there reporting on his trip to Madawaska, saying search parties were already working both sides of the river. Sophie had been helping Grandma serving breakfast, but now they both sat quietly at a corner table. I, myself, was attending an emergency meeting with Dr. Meyer.

“I talked with Mark this morning,” she began. “The news broke yesterday afternoon but Emile was not identified until after midnight. The body in the river was wearing a service uniform, maybe Marine. Mark said he was carrying something in a gunny sack. Could that have been a uniform?”

“Yes,” I replied. “He had shown me his dress outfit, blue jacket with red trim. A white hat with visor would have been regulation. He showed it to me several weeks ago in a duffle bag. I had noticed it in the closet I shared with him”

“Why did he have it,” asked the doctor.

“He told me that he would need it for a ceremony for some form of closure on a very bad thing that happened in Nam.”

“Do you know what that bad thing was?” she asked.

“No, but I have a feeling that wearing that uniform yesterday is a key to understanding his actions.”

Emile awoke suddenly as he heard the sound of the diesel in the distance. He reached for his gun but instead found only a broken branch. The light of early morning was shining through the pine and spruce. He was surprised to feel his thirst. When had he last has a drink?

The logging truck came around the corner heading straight towards him. He tried to move but he was terribly sore and could not. A large Peterbilt Diesel pulling an empty log body swerved suddenly and came to a stop.

“Oh my God, are you ok,” cried the driver at he jumped to the ground.

Emile moved his lips but no sound came out. He tried to rise again and succeeded with the tuckers help.

“Oh mon dieu,” said the trucker pointing to Emile’s chest. “Jilbert! You are Emile Jilbert.”

“Would you happen to have a drink of water,” Emile replied. “I apparently have not had a drink for a while.”

“Everyone is looking for you. You are a hero. You threw the bomb off the bridge. Everyone thinks you are dead.”

“I am dead. I died months ago in Vietnam.”

They sat, drank water and talked for a while. Emile brought he hands to his face as if washing them with a cloth. He then looked up at the driver.

“I know you, don’t I?” asked Emile. “Oh my God, you are Jack Kelley from the dance. The night I sawed the gym doors and you flattened me with one punch.”

They both reached out and softly shook hands.

“I was with the 101st Airborne during the Tet offensive,” announced Jack. “I know what you mean about being dead.”

“Where am I?” Emile finally asked. “I was in the river quite a while. I am not sure why I am still alive.”

“We are just off the Beaulieu Road about eight miles from St. Agathe. I would guess that you came out of the river at St. David and made it this far on instinct.”

Jack insisted that they ride together to the emergency room at Fort Kent Hospital but Emile refused. Jack got out the truck’s first aid kit, cleaned up Emile’s head wound and put some disinfectant on his arm scratches.

“I have to take this load to Daigle, then I head home to Soldier Pond where I now live.” Emile agreed to ride as far as Jack’s home. He would then walk the rest of the way. He said he would be ok once he got his legs under him.

They rode for a while, sharing a few stories of high school and sports. They soon reached a well-stocked logging yard. Saws and a skidder could be heard in the distance. Jack was well trained at log loading and within thirty minutes they were back on the road again. For Emile this was all new country, but after an hour or so, they reached the mill at Daigle and Emile could sense home.

“This is fine,” announced Emile when they reached Jack’s home town. “The Wallingrass Road is nearby and I will be home by tomorrow.” Jack was still

adamant not to let Emile head off on his own but there was no stopping him. Jack's wife Mary made him a large basket of food and all at once, he was gone, leaving Jack standing by his truck.Emile had a meeting to attend that night and still had a long way to go.

He was never alone that day. Somehow the forest knew that his mind was not all there, so it helped him to find the right paths. Rabbits ran ahead and crows and one hawk appeared to give him comfort and direction.

His dad's spirit arrived for a short while to get him onto the Brisse Culotte Road and down over Rosignal Brook. They had fished there together on Emile's tenth birthday when dad was in AA. His father looked so much younger now as he cast his fly out over the brook. Emile laid down for an hours rest after a long drink and a swim. He was awakened by Duke, an old horse Gramps had in the 50's, licking his face. Dad was gone. It was time to move on.

By late afternoon Emile began to sense more surroundings from his childhood. Occasionally, he would hear a dog bark or a car engine but he saw no houses, only the occasional road he quickly crossed. He was following the sun as it sank in the west. As long as he had the sun, he would be fine. Fall was coming, the hardwoods were starting to color and the evening promised a chill. His clothes were dry and his boots still had their polished toes. He would be alright.

That night there was no moon to light his way so he ate the last of Mary's' lunch and lay down. He then gathered some newly fallen leaves to lie on and pulled some branches up close to ease a late night breeze. He soon drifted off into a deep sleep.

Every day when they returned from their patrol out beyond the village they crossed a small wooden bridge and entered the village. If it were a night patrol they would often be met by the children on their way to school. Emile now knew several of them by name and he would call out "Eh, bonjour Binh, Bonjour Due Tao." And they would call back "Xin chào, Emile." And he would often follow them to school for several hours of English class before sleeping. But this day would be different, this day would change Emile's life forever.

An owl signaled the arrival of dawn. Emile rubbed his hands over his face and looked around. At first he saw no one, the dark shadows taking the shapes of things they were not. Then he saw him, sitting on a downed pine log, picking his teeth with a stick. "Thank you for coming. It has been a while", Emile said in a wordless nod. The bear looked up and smiled, if an animal that large can smile.

"Are you ok?' came the message back.

"I am fine. It has been many years since you last came to take me home." The bear remained silent.

"I need to tell you a story, one I have told no one. It happened in a far-away country during a war." The bear resumed his tooth picking.

"I was part of an army that was stationed in a small village. We were there for several months. I made friends with a school teacher because we both spoke French. She invited me into her school to meet her students. We became friends. Her name was Cam which meant 'orange', like the fruit.

"Her village was in enemy territory. One day we were returning from patrol when she ran out beyond the village to tell me in French that the Viet Cong had planted

a bomb on the bridge. I was the only French speaker and I was walking tail in the patrol. I began to run past the others and be the first to the bridge and had only seconds to disarm it.

"My training was in disarming bombs. Some would go off with movement, others with a timing fuse device. I looked across, saw where I might locate a bomb if it were up to me and dove onto my stomach, crawling to the center of the bridge. There it was, a fuse now ticking from my motion. With my training, I disarmed it.

"The next morning the teacher and three of her students were found dead on the bridge, her stomach cut open. On the bridge in spray paint was written in Vietnamese, 'Yankee, đi về nhà' and in French 'Yankee, rentrer à la maison'. Finally in English,Yankee go home!

"Brun, they are dead because of me. If we had been blown up on the bridge, they would be alive today."

Brun stood and came towards Emile. He had forgotten the immensity of his body. He lay down next to Emile and wrapped his paws around his shaking body. They lay there like lovers until Emile started crying, at first in short sobs, then in complete remorse. Brun's smell was the power of the forest, its earth, its rot, its new life. When the tears were gone, Emile looked up into the forest canopy of leaves and realized, for the first time, where he was, in his great grandfather Marcelle's woodlot, not ten miles from home.

He closed his eyes in prayer and when he opened them, Brun was gone. Once again he had led Emile home.

.I Love You

The ocean of Cohasset was always best in the fall, dark blue and full of breezes. Dad was sitting in the bow of his Friendship sloop as it made its way past Minots Light, talking with Emile. I was at the helm, remembering the many days of my childhood steering safely past the rock ledges hidden below the surface we now traversed. We had been down from St. Francis for just two weeks but it seemed like a lifetime.

Sophie and Frannie had come across Emile fast asleep in a pine grove just northwest of the confluence of the Jones and Thibideau Brooks. Emile took a while to come around, stumbling with his words.

"Brun," he said. "Brun!" "Tésipow maqtewék muwin!"

"Brun is the name of a Black Bear that has been a friend of our family's since I was a small child," Sophie explained to my dad. "He saved Emile's life already once. I think that Emile is speaking Mi'kmaq, the language of our indigenous peoples and one that Brun and Emile somehow share."

The three sat in the forest glen offering Emile sips of water. Emile only looked at the forest floor, avoiding the eyes of the new arrivals. Only when Sophie began to stand did he speak.

"He was here, waiting for me last evening. He lay down close so I would not be cold, and when the dawn was breaking, I was able to tell him all that had happened, how Cam and the school children died and I had not." He then noticed

my dad and said, “Hi Mr. Hagerty, how are you?” and reached out with a smile and shook Dad’s hand. And with the strength of both men, Emile rose, brushed himself off as if just waking from a quick nap, and took the lead as we began walking home.

Dr. Meyer’s official diagnosis was concussion of the front left lobe, a miracle given the proximity of the explosion. She had kept him bedridden in order to safely manage the flow of family and friends but most importantly keeping the state and cross border police at bay.

Emile’s courageous actions in uniform that day were front page news across the country. After the Maine Governor’s visit with Emile at the Fort Kent Hospital, the message went out from Augusta that this returning vet was a hero and the FBI could redirected their focus on who planted the bomb and not the one who risked his life to disarm it.

Frannie was a regular visitor to Emile’s room those first few days. “Dr. Meyer,” he suggested “when it becomes safe to leave your hospital’s IC unit, might your patient endure a trip to Cohasset, only twenty miles from the Mass General Hospital in Boston and their methadone program there?” The doctor agreed and within forty eight hours all three of us were headed south in my tiny foreign car.

The implications of the conversation in the church between Dad and Jacque the night of the bridge bombing also rode with us south to Boston. As we sailed the Patience back into Cohasset Harbor, we passed an old New England estate turned into a Jesuit summer retreat for Boston College teaching staff. There on the dock, with bony white legs ensconced in black bathing shorts, was Father John Brennan, a long time buddy of my dad’s, now sitting toe to toe with Father Jacque DuBolais

and working on Jacque's retirement from the priesthood. They both waved as we sailed by.

"My nightmare," Jack began, "has always been what to say to all my parishioners, many I baptized, some I married and a few I buried. Their families believed that I had the power to consecrate, to bless their new born, their marriages, and their burials. I blessed the passing of cats and dogs as well as the new carrots in the garden. I told them that all of God's creation was sacred. With my collar I have made a fool of them."

"Ah Jacque," began Father John, "You know, many of us are not meant to be priests for our entire lives. I have a calling now but that could change. The blessings you imparted onto your congregation mean no less just because you were not ordained. You lost your entire family as did your Israeli doctor. Yet you both came to that remote corner of the world to be of service to your fellow human beings, many of whom were suffering. You deserve some love and caring after what you have both been through.

"My suggestion is that you request the Archbishop of Portland, Peter Gerety, to be removed from the priesthood. This is called laicization. Peter and I are old friends. I will see him next week. He will request a meeting with you. He will give you a special blessing and that should do it. Peter is a real good guy.

"You can tell your congregation what you wish but I think that they will not be surprised by your true story, only worried that you may be leaving the St. John's Valley."

“Ah, no chance of that,” Jacque quickly responded. “I’ve already been offered a counseling position at the hospital. I’ll be the same guy listening to the same stories, just with no collar”.

“And perhaps with a ring,” Father John injected with a smile. “And the French wear them on the right hand if I remember.”

That night as we sat on the front porch enjoying mom’s cream chicken and asparagus, the light on Minots came on.

“Could the Hagerty’s tell me why the lighthouse blinks 143,” Emile respectfully asked.

It was surprisingly Mom who replied.

“During the time of your war between France and Germany in the 1870’s my Irish relatives and those of Frannie’s were dying at the hands of the English, being starved off our land so the Queen could have cheap meat and potatoes. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants fled to America and Boston was the port of choice for many.

“It was a cruel crossing and a sad ending for the Irish Brig St. John, who crashed on those very rocks over which you sailed earlier today. They were in sight of Boston Harbor when a northeast gale and the Grampus Ledges sank the ship. Some made it to shore alive, some washed up on the beach for days after. Those one hundred and forty three are buried here in our town, thus the 143.”

My dad took it from there. “My mother was first generation Irish, a policeman’s daughter. Somehow she was the first Irish American woman to graduate from

Harvard College. She went on to become a wealthy woman. Yet when she came to Cohasset and wanted to buy this house, she was told that no Irish had ever lived on Atlantic Ave. “Well then, I guess I’ll be the first!” she replied, and she was.

So I prefer to think of the light as blinking ‘I Love You’ thanking all the old Yankee families from letting us immigrants, Irish, Portuguese, Italian, Polish and French all join together to enjoy this small bit of paradise.

Emile poured more wine in his glass and stood.

“I would like to make a toast to all my Irish friends for we have had some hard time getting along over the years. There is Jack Kelley who kept me alive just a few weeks ago as I walked through the forest heading home and Tom Gallagher who had my back while in Vietnam. I agree, ‘I Love You’ is what the light is blinking tonight and my blessings go to those who died and those who live on.”

Author's Prologue

I was far from home in a cold, snow covered land, visiting my friend Pavel and his wife Galina. I looked out over the fields to a young stallion in the distance. My mind drifted back momentarily to another horse, another farm, another time.

"He is our new colt, Valiet," said Pavel in Russian. "I want you to ride him."

I walked out to meet the horse, a simple rope halter in my hand. As I approached, Valiet stood still, not moving a muscle. I lifted my right hand and slowly began stroking the horse's neck. Then from a faraway time I heard a voice.

"Don't ride me. I am afraid and I will hurt you." Tears formed in my eyes and rolled down my cold cheek.

"Thank you," I said. The horse turned and offered a long sigh as I gave one last stroke and walked away across the snowy field.

Many years passed, Marty and I raised a family, and we now live on own farm. Sheep, chickens and large horses eat the grass in the surrounding pasture and tall trees climb the hills beyond the brook. I often leave my family to try and heal the world in which I have traveled for many years. I come home tired, worried, often more afraid than when I left. I have seen dark times in places where the forest turned red with the fire of war. Some of my men died. I wished I could talk with Bud, tell him about the sadness I now carry with me and ask him what I should do.

My draft horse team, Willie and Nick, watch as I grow older and wonder how long we will be working together. In the summer I mow hay with them and in the winter

harvest wood for our stoves. Like them, I am slowing down and like them, I am sometimes afraid. I am also starting to hear voices.

“What should we do?” I heard from their stalls.

“What is to be done?” I answered back, looking around to make sure no one is nearby to confirm my growing insanity

“We must be careful what trees we cut,” was their reply as we climbed the path behind the barn. “The world depends on us.”

“Sounds like a tall order,” I responded.

“Don’t worry, we will help” came a distant chorus from high up the hill in the forest.

I usually brush the horses after their lunch. The harness is still heavy and I teeter on a wooden box as I throw it over their shoulders and backs. I am rushing now because I know that the sun is dropping over the mountains in the next few hours and the afternoon will grow cold.

“Why the rushing? ”

Willie is the first to push back and refuses to open his mouth to receive the bridle. I respond by putting molasses on the bit but Willie shakes his head and the molasses ends up on a nearby wall.

Then I screw an eyebolt onto the barn floor to hold open his mouth. . Willie tares that out with one pull. There are days now when the sun is dropping behind the hill before the bit and bridle are in place.

I became very discouraged. Then I remembered Sophie and what she had once told me. The next Saturday I harness the horses. When I come to Willie, I leave the bit and bridle on the barn wall and face him. I touch my forehead to his head, close my eyes, breathe deeply and say, “I am lost. I need help.”

Nick is still in his stall but his ears are up. Neither horse move. Then I hear, “Drink a cup of tea slowly”. This makes no sense to me but I am out of options. I go into the house, heat some water, drink a cup of tea slowly and return. Willie then opens his mouth.

“Why?” I said. “Because you are never here,” is the reply. And for the first time I understood. I could not be with Willie because I was too busy managing my fears, my sadness. “I will try and do better,” I reply. “We will help,” said Willie.

That winter the weather was hard on everyone. Christmas saw a week of sub-zero weather and by New Years it was up in the 70’s. The temperature change was very hard on the horses. I gave them salt every morning so they would drink lots of water and not get sick.

Across the country there were blizzards, hurricanes and tornadoes and in California entire cities and forests were on fire. Everyone was talking about the climate. Some people said we all were doomed. I grew more afraid, more helpless.

One day, when the team and I were up in the woods, I set my saw down on the snow without starting it. I looked over at the horses and closed my eyes. “I don’t know what to cut,” I said. The team stepped forward slowly, stopping at a small grove of trees. “You can take this one,” I heard. “It is injured and cannot be healed.”

I walked up to a small grove of trees and saw a beech in the center. Its top had been eaten by a porcupine and the tree had stopped growing. By taking this tree the others around it would prosper. It was a good choice.

“Take me,” another voice called out from a neighboring stand. “I am the heat for your stove. The oak by my side will grow stronger and clean the air you breathe.” I pushed aside the notion that I was going crazy and started my saw.

The horses moved around the woodlot, deciding which ones should be harvested. I still was not sure of the source of the voices but trusted my team. I marveled at what was happening, found myself worrying less, but often received a reminder from Willie ‘to be here’.

Spring came finally and I took a long overdue trip to the town of my childhood and the yellow farm house. I walked out into the field, lingered by the stone wall and then visited the ice pond. It was a warm afternoon and I sat down nest to the tree where farmer White’s wife had hidden my clothes.

The sun was setting by the time I finished telling Bud all that had happened.

“So what are you going to do?” called out a voice from the nearby trees. And I smiled because I knew that my answer to that question had changed over the years.

“I will listen for your voice because I now know it is really my voice. I never knew that because I was not listening. And I cannot listen if I am not here. So no matter where I am, I will work to be here. Then I will not be alone. I will have you. I will have me. ”

Thanks to my wife Marty supporting my search for the present

What Comes to Pass

Some of the characters that appear in this book are real and some are less real. But to me, now they have all become very real and have a role to play in more stories to come from the St. John's River Valley.

Sophie finishes forestry school with honors and applies to Maine Law School. She finishes with honors in 1974, just in time for the Maine Woodsman's Strike. Her first job is with Pine Tree Legal in the Presque Isle Office. During law school and Pine Tree, she is allowed to return home for the winter to log with Grandpa. She marries a high school sweet heart who is a State Police officer, which sometimes complicates matters.

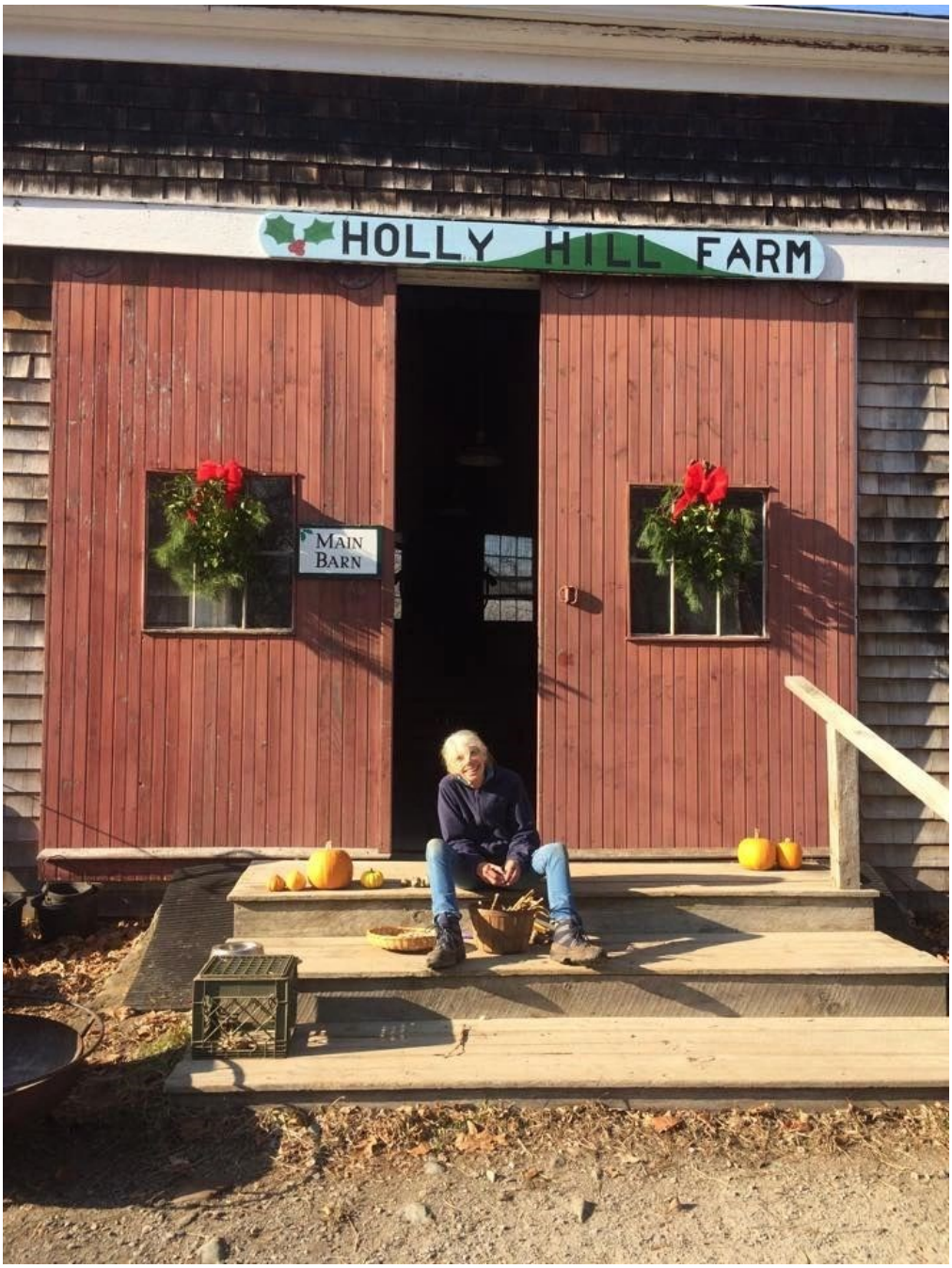
Emile stays on in Cohasset to work at Frannie's furniture factory but they both love building boats. On the weekend, Emile fills a void left by my brother and me as he and dad first build a sailing dingy, then a dory. On his third summer, they built a replica of a St. John's River Valley 'bateau', a long boat use by river drivers in Maine to keep the logs flowing down stream towards the ocean. Tom Putnam's son in law askes Emile to return home and together they create a thriving business taking tourists for a one week trips down river in the bateaus, staying overnight in the reconditioned logging camps that dot the St. John. In one camp the cook is Emile's mom where she prepares the same meals that she once did for up to thirty drivers. And her stories are as good as her meals.

Jacque leaves the priest hood and starts working with returning vets. He marries Dr. Meyer on the Sunset Bridge with many from the St. Charles congregation in attendance. Dr. Meyer keeps her job at Northern Maine Hospital and together they adopt two young children, one 2 year old boy from an Irish American family and one 6 mo. old girl from a French speaking home. They claim that this is not intentional. The rumor is that they are looking for a third child with some Hebrew genes.

I marry Marty, the woman of my dreams. Barney and Knickerbocker are our first draft team and the sale of Marty's pottery cups and bowls keeps us above water while I start a logging business with a neighbor. Then one day Bub Dow drives into our farm with a request. He was from Allagash, one town down the road from St. Francis, the end of the road in fact.

He knows all the folks that now seem like a dream to me. "There is discontent again in the St. John's Valley," he announces. "The mill owners are bringing in Canadian loggers, paying them less and putting local folks out of work. Because you speak French and are a horse logger, I am asking you to come to Quebec and ask the Canadian loggers to stay home during the strike."

So before you can say 'Jack Robinson', I drive with Bub back to the land of Sophie, Emile and Brun. But this is a story for another time.



Dick White's Farm in Cohasset was always, and still is, Holly Hill Farm, a non-profit farm with an educational mission. My dear friend Jean White lives in the yellow house and has a running dialog with all the animals that she feeds every morning.