



The Mill

by Justin Rossier

[Home](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

It was one hell of a long trip to that mill. My Uncle Renee picked me up at the train station at 1am and we spent most of the night driving over bumpy farmer's fields, the air sweetened by freshly distributed manure. I hadn't seen Renee in years, but he was still pretty much the same, shifting awkwardly in his seat as he postulated knowledge, this time about the numerous cave dwellings in the region. Through some bad acting I feigned interest. As he cited the prehistoric artefacts associated with the dwellings I tried to make out some of the moonlit landscape. His rambling segued into the description of his house, referred to as the mill, and went into detail about its quaint setting and history. He talked as my head bobbed from side to side from fatigue and the windy roads began to churn my stomach.

When we arrived my impression of the mill was far from quaint. The two-storey stone house was there as he had described, with a front door crudely painted military green. Beside the house was a pathway to the backyard which was adjacent to another two-storey house, much thinner and more decrepit than the first one, attached to a barn that extended to the edge of the river. It was conjoined to an older building leading away from the houses with small square windows to indicate it had once been a workshop. These, Renee informed me, are the remains of the old mill which gives the place its name.

To complete the paved square that connected all these building was a fenced-in pasture across from the main house. The pasture was rigged with an electric fence to keep whatever livestock was in there at bay.

A small river coiled around the back of the houses and a steady hiss announced a small cascade created by a dam a hundred metres upstream. From what I could tell from the drive, the mill was located in a deep, isolated pocket of a valley that was a kilometre across at its highest point. The air was moist and humid, which I noticed when a clammy fog settled on my skin as I stepped out of the car. The darkness was coal black. Even the moonlight only got so far as the trees on the crest of the surrounding hills. I inhaled one breath of the air and looked at the flat, stony complexion of the place. My guts started to churn.

Renee escorted me into the house. We entered quietly since it was around 4 am. The house seemed designed for a rugged farming family, but had since been re-decorated by school children. The box-shaped kitchen and living room on either side of the door were painted a pale peach, and the collection of tacky paintings of farm animals and picturesque countryside

rivalled anything found inside a retirement home. Remarkably incongruous to the décor was a mounted Walther P38 pistol set between a framed painting of a grazing pony and a shelf displaying two gaudy floral vases.

As we mounted the stairs, Renee whispered to me that my lodgings were next door, but since he hadn't had time to get the key from the neighbour, I would stay in their spare room for the first night. I was ushered into the room as if I were on the lam while he disappeared into the shadows. I started to unpack, pausing to marvel at how the room was painted a lurid pink. The red shade on the lamp beside the bed made it even more suggestive.

Renee returned to the doorway and bashfully looked over his shoulder. I heard a woman's voice murmur off somewhere and figured that must be Helene, the woman he had recently remarried. She appeared out of the dark wearing a bulky housecoat, her hair tousled. Her stark pale complexion came into the lamp light. She inspected me with a leer before stepping forward to exchange the customary pressing of cheeks. I got the impression she would have preferred not to. She asked Renee a few questions about the drive. What were the roads like? Did it rain? Did you see anyone? She gave me a nod as she left the room.

Renee grinned nervously and shifted back and forth. Helene had left a chill behind. To break the ice, he told me she might appear as a shy person on the surface but that she was actually quite feisty. I raised my brow and nodded to convey to him that I understood perfectly well, even though I was almost convinced she was a whack job.

Renee launched into the history of the house until I told him I really needed to sleep. I closed the door and shut the light off before I undressed. So much pink was unhealthy.

The next morning I washed up and found Helene in the kitchen with her daughter Camille. On the table were a lone jar of jam and an empty box of Corn Flakes. Helene motioned vaguely to the table and I sat down to scrounge up a piece of bread and spread it with jam. Helene didn't speak much English and my French was sparse, but I thanked her when she offered me coffee. To make small talk I asked how she was doing. She said she was fine in a tone which indicated all hell was going to break loose.

Contrary to what I had thought, Camille was no toddler, but rather a young teenager ravaged by pubescent pimples which she tried to cover with too much blush. She had just generously doused herself in some sort of sweetened vanilla perfume. I offered her a smile and attempted to shake hands with her, only for her to remain looking into some deep void at the bottom of her cereal bowl. Evidently I had interrupted an argument that was resumed once I began drinking coffee. Helene told Camille to do her work no matter how much her

teacher *a une tete de cons*. Something else about how she had to do what adults told her to do. Camille only showed any emotion when Helene had her back turned in the form of menacing scowls. I offered a grin so as to show sympathy for her cause, only for her to regard me as she would a dog turd on the pavement.

Camille left soon afterwards, only after dropping her bowl into the sink. Helene watched her with seething fury, lips pursed. It was then my time to go and catch my ride with Renee, who I could see milling about outside, only for Helene to ask me to sit down as if she needed to explain something to me.

She told me she had divorced from her ex-husband because he had cheated on her, but that he still came around because he was having an affair on another woman with the neighbour, Gabrielle:

Strange too because his girlfriend was young and pretty, everything Gabrielle wasn't, and he still routinely went to her house. She owned this house, while Gabrielle owned the rest. It used to be owned by Gabrielle and her mother, Madame Lestonnac, until she died. Well, she didn't die actually, she disappeared. If you ask Gabrielle she says, of course, that she's alive, but I don't believe her. Either way, if she were alive they wouldn't speak to each other anyways. Gabrielle used to be married. She was about to sell the mill and buy a nice property from a local farmer, but then her husband disappeared one day. It was probably for the better, because the farmer whose house they were about to buy ended up chopping his wife to bits and keeping her body in a storage freezer for six months. So you can imagine the stigma.

Renee poked his head and sheepishly told me he was ready to drive me into town. Helene stared after me as I excused myself from the table.

Oh boy, that was way too much information.

Outside Renee was throwing fresh grass and some grey matter into a trough for a Shetland pony that had its quarters in the fenced pasture I had noticed the night before. Renee told me his name was Rocky. Rocky had a studded collar around his neck. It looked ridiculous on a pony. When I approached the fence, Rocky charged up to me and kicked his fat clumpy legs in my direction. Watch out, he's quite aggressive towards strangers, Renee said, as if offering a dirge. We left a minute later, Rocky in all his lard huffing at me as we left the mill.

The whole point of coming out here in the first place was for a lucrative contract at a meat processing plant. The payout was enough to enable me to put a down payment on a house back home. My mother had received an unexpected phone call from Renee, and because of the novelty of the call she saw it as sign of him reaching out to her, which ignited a hope that the

great silence and distance between them would be bridged. Then Renee told her about this job at the plant, how he would have taken it himself but wasn't a qualified engineer or technician, and caught up in the moment my mother got on my case about it. Even though I didn't want to come way out here, she somehow convinced me this was the big cash in I was looking for. So here I was, a 1000 miles from home, being put up by my long lost uncle and his new wife and her kids.

The work at the plant was fairly straightforward, although a bit more isolating than I had thought. I had to fix all these little ticks in the generators and jams in the various conveyor belts, as well as find out what was wrong with their waste filtration tank. I lugged my equipment around the plant and through rooms with miasmas derived from rotting meat and evaporating blood. In the afternoon I was accompanied by Gregoire, a stiff level manager with a thick accent and even thicker moustache. There were no jokes.

To get home I waited at a remote intersection not too far from the plant at the head to the road leading up into the hills. As had been planned, Renee picked me up there to drive me back to the mill, and we arrived at a quarter to eight. Upon entering through the green doors, my greeting was met with apathy, although I could see that one coming. Camille was back at the table with her headphones on, which could not contain the Euro-trash song she had on high volume. Her brother, Eric, was a ghoulish-looking kid who was gnawing away on chicken wings and rubbing the grease and sauce over his lips. On the table were pasta salad and a bowl of couscous. Helene glowered at the time and then at me and then at the food. I got the hint.

To make up for my faux pas (i.e. having a job), I fetched some ciders and white wine that I had brought as a gift. Helene accepted them with suspicion. Can I use them for cooking?

They are better for drinking actually.

Helene didn't seem to believe me, and put them in her dishevelled pantry. That was the last I saw of them.

During dinner, Renee, who seemed to carefully choose his words and look at Helene for approval, asked me how work at the plant was. I started explaining about the turbines and conveyor belts, but I hadn't spoken for even a minute before he veered the discussion over to The Mill and how it could be made operational. He went on to tell stories of how he'd like to get themselves off the grid and produce their own electric power, perhaps even build a green house in which they'd grow their own vegetables and raise their own livestock. Eventually he would like to eat only Mill-grown meat.

Is that why you have Rocky?

I thought a spontaneous joke wouldn't hurt. There was a

sudden freeze which lasted a second. Helene's eyes flared up and cooled. Joke took off and crashed and burst into flames. Renee stuttered before going on about his dreams as Helene and Camille resumed their bickering from the morning. Eric grabbed bits of salad with his hands and kept jumping in his seat and making disturbing grunts. The grunts grew in fervour until they interrupted Renee, which he responded to with contrived laughter. As adults do when a child does something bizarre, we grinned back at the little runt and pondered our own thoughts of admiration. *You've got problems, kid*, was mine.

The table was carefully set regardless of the little monster's etiquette. Dinner proceeded eerily, as I assumed was their norm. Without grace or a *bon appetit*, the family began cutting into their steaks which the parents chased down with bitter wine. The only comments made were for passing plates and condiments, then the sound of cutlery scraping on ceramic and gnashing teeth. Camille's eye became filled with painful tears as Helene's gaze cut through the walls like a buzz saw before taking a dig at each of us. While everyone hovered over their food, the matriarch fumed and snorted, until her face became flushed red and the smoke began to pour out from her ears and nostrils. Her subjects trembled so ferociously the glasses began to clink, until from tip of her sinuous fingers a flame lit on the tablecloth. Everyone began eating with renewed vigour as fire devoured the table.

You seem thoughtful, Helene said. I shrugged and smiled, which seemed to disappoint her. The vision faded. Eric's fierce eyes stared up at me.

After dinner Renee escorted me to my new quarters. To get into the room we climbed the steps to the landing of a barn lit by one lone bulb hanging down from beams wrapped in cobwebs. The room was spacious, almost all wood, and seemed to have become a storage room for an estate sale. There were couches, chairs, dressers, pad-locked trunks, book shelves, stacks of crates and a long armoire with its door ajar revealing hung suits in plastic covers. It all seemed to have been put there in the 1940s and long since forgotten. My quarters were at the far back of this room. From the outside I assumed the room would be shoddy, but the door opened to reveal a newly-renovated abode. Peace at last.

Here's a flashlight, for the barn has only one switch and that's the one outside. It'll be dark when you get up, so you'll need it to get from your room to the top of the stairs. Rest up.

Renee left. I went into the bathroom to wash up. What a piece of work this family was. Thank God for my own quarters. It had wood-planked walls and a pleasant odour of fresh grout and carpet and clean bed sheets, as well as a nice window from which I could see jack-all. *Tant pis*. Tomorrow is a new day. A couple of months of purgatory and then I'm buying that house

on Weyburn Road.

I nestled into bed and cuddled up to my dreams. It was when I was in that inert state just before sleep that I began hearing footsteps. My relaxed muscles went tense and goose bumps washed over my skin. The footsteps started from inside the barn near the door to my room and shuffled slowly over to one of the far corners. After being momentarily incapacitated by a brick-shitting fear, I got out of bed and stood there cowering.

Who the *fuck* is that?

A frantic scan of my room to discover there was little to use as a weapon, so I rummaged quietly through my work bag and clasped my Philips screwdriver and 14-inch Maglite. Only once I had turned the flashlight on was I capable of rational thought. It could be the neighbour I hadn't met yet, emerging from a lost door to fetch something from the room. What could she possibly need at this hour? Perhaps an old dress she wanted to retrieve or a fuse had blown and the electrical panel was in there, or a machete she could use to chop me to pieces small enough to fit into a storage freezer for six months.

I took a deep breath and watched my hand reach for the door knob. Then I shoved it open and sprayed the room with the flashlight, flailing it around so fast it was as if I was trying to recreate the ambiance of a discotheque. Once I got a sliver of nerve I focused the light on the corner where I had last heard the footsteps. My breath let out—there appeared to be nothing there.

Ha.

Then there was a movement in the far corner of the room. What I had thought was a pile of linen on a chair stood upright and turned to reveal a round, meaty outline of a head. When the face was illuminated, what I saw turned every cell and fibre in my body to mush: the gaunt, wrinkled, sour face of an old woman whose irises reflected a sinister gold shimmer, her mouth gaping at me like a fish out of water. I shrunk to the size of a mouse and a wind rushed into the barn and pushed me back into the room. I hooked the door closed in passing and then was pressed up against the wall, still clutching the flashlight and the screwdriver in one hand. After a moment of being pinned there, the force receded and I slipped down to the floor.

It was a long night of twitching at every creak and groan coming from the barn's tired structure. The old woman did not move. I imagined her fossilized into the position which I had last seen her in, coiled up like a snake not quite ready to let down its guard.

I did manage a two hour restless doze and was awakened by the alarm at 6:30 am. Wielding my flashlight and screwdriver I hurried through the barn and out onto the open-air landing, not

daring to look into the darkness around me. When I walked into Helene's house she told me I looked like a drunk. She eyed me suspiciously for the umpteenth time. No, no, I didn't drink anything. Camille was there in full adolescent apocalypse. She had her Discman on the table surrounded by a splash of CDs. I picked one up to look at the cover, but before I could examine the title she snapped it out of my hand and set it down. Little Eric was slurping cereal and grinding his butt into his chair. He paused from his grinding to pick his nose and offer his index finger. I downed my coffee and left.

The work I did that day was particularly torturous. The plant had a fairly large generator that was on the fritz. It took me ten hours stuck in a hot room screaming with industrial noise to figure out it was a computer glitch. To end the day I had to fix a compressor on one of the plant's grinders for the meat composting tank. After work I waited at the intersection for Renee to pick me up. He never showed. I waited for over an hour just in case he got the time wrong, then I went over to the road leading to the mill and hitched a ride with a lady who chain-smoked. She didn't flick her ash, but rather let it fall on her lap, and she drove fast with one hand limply on the steering wheel. Despite giving her heads up, she passed the mill road by a good quarter of a mile.

I spent my walk along the dark narrow road to the mill validating the thought that I didn't like this place. I didn't like the house, the ghoulish woman prowling through the barn, Helene and her terrible children, and Renee because he had ditched me. He was the friendlier one of the lot, but he also seemed like a recidivist who was trying to keep out of trouble.

In the courtyard was Renee's car. When I approached the house I heard a vicious argument going on between Helene and Renee. They were yelling in hoarse voices which seemed to be moving from one room to another.

You make me sick! That's all you do is make me sick, sick, sick!!

Then tell me where you were all afternoon? Which whore was it?

She's no whore...Why you...Who do you think you are to accuse me like that?

Go to hell you bastard!

You make me sick, sick, *SICK!*

No, didn't want to be to be anywhere near that. I walked up to the barn, turning the light on this time, and went into my room. I lay down and fell asleep shortly after.

The next morning hunger drove me into the house. I entered anticipating Helene's comments and Camille's xenophobic

wrath, only for the house to be in a perfect silence. As if racing against time, I grabbed a croissant in the bread box and jam from the pantry and stuffed them in my mouth while fiddling with the coffee machine. While loading the coffee grains into the holder I heard a sound coming from downstairs. It was followed by the trudging of steps up stairs leading to a door I had previously assumed was a closet. It flung open to reveal Helene in her farming garb: weathered gardening gloves, hair in a floral bonnet, a plastic apron smeared with dirt to which a few chicken feathers stuck. I had leaned casually against the table to give the impression of just, I don't know... standing there like an idiot, but I should have known how Helene would respond. She raised her head as if taking stock of the infraction I had just committed, at which point I started babbling about how I had just eaten a croissant, that I didn't mean to intrude. Just wanted a croissant. She lunged forward and inspected the kitchen to find out what I had really been doing. After her wild eyes couldn't find out what that was, she stepped forward and grabbed me by the shoulders.

You're not supposed to be in here. You can't just do what you want. Not here.

What do you mean?

The question seemed to puzzle her. She fixed me with her gaze as she removed her gloves, then grabbed my chin with her little hands.

No, you listen!

But I'd had enough. I removed her hand from my chin and walked out of the house and back to my room. She followed me until the front door.

You can't be a savage, you know!

Okay. It was official. Helene was disturbed. I grabbed my work bag and walked out to the road to hitch a ride to the plant. While working I thought about the situation. I had only been at the mill since a few days and already despised it. It was no wonder our families had been disconnected for so long, knowing scant details about each other's lives until I came along out of nowhere. That said, the money I was getting from this contract was the most I had ever made. Overtime was \$150 an hour, most of it in my pocket. Taking that into consideration, I decided to forsake social graces and check into a hotel. It would put a dent in my gains, but if I looked at it as a Sanity Tax it was still worth it.

After work on Tuesday, again, no Renee. I caught a ride with a young family who were kind but bugged out that I was foreign to these parts. They left me in the darkness at the head of the mill road after 9 pm. This road wound through the forest at the bottom of a small cliff face of sandstone, layers of which often fell down. The river leading to the mill ran twenty feet or so

alongside the road, giving me an indication as to where to walk as I made my way through the darkness of raspy branches. The mill's lights were visible through the trees but not much of it reached me. With my thoughts revolving around whose phone I should use to look for hotels, I noticed that I was not alone. There was a sudden snapping of twigs to my left. I stopped and peered into the dark, expecting to be staring at my own paranoia; instead, I made out a small crowd of glistening eyes staring back at me. They were huddled together, moving their heads slightly.

I grabbed a stick from the ground and menaced them with it. They surged backwards, revealing themselves as my eyes accustomed to the dark: slim figures with wooden skin, with flat heads curving up into spiky antlers. As they took off into the forest their bodies knocked against each other and the tree trunks to the sound of a hundred hammers splashing onto a wooden xylophone.

They ran to the dark and I ran towards the light of the mill. My legs were pumped from the adrenaline rush and sent me flying into the courtyard where, coincidentally, Renee and Helene had resumed their argument, their voices hoarser than ever. Renee was on one side of the courtyard, half in his car and telling Helene it didn't matter where he was off to; on the other side, in the doorway beneath the lantern, Helene screamed at Renee that he was a pathetic coward. They both paused as I ran right between them, startling Rocky who bolted into the depths of his pasture. Up the landing, through the barn, into my room, the locking of the door. God damn!

It was a lot of work holding onto your sanity in this place. It was as if there was something in the air, a hallucinogen in the constant mist, or chemicals from the farms being brought here by the river.

I packed my things. After having seen what I had, there was no chance I was going to leave here at night. That old bag of a phantom could sing 'Dream Weaver' outside the door until dawn if she so fancied and I still wasn't going to budge. No way. I was going to hold the fort until day light. But I had to make those phone calls.

Once I had calmed down a bit and the screaming had stopped, I went to meet the neighbour, Gabrielle Lestonnac, for the first time. Her house was in the stone building attached to the barn. I knocked and she opened the door and welcomed me in without hesitation. The look on her face told me that life was dreary and painful. She offered me tea and told me I could certainly use the phone. She put the kettle on and then sat in puffy chair and smoked a cigarette as I made my phone calls. There were only two hotels in the region and they were booked for the next five days. *Jeeesusss*, five more days at the mill. I booked a room and faced Gabrielle.

Have a seat. Would you like something to eat?

She set out a plate of various local cheeses, cold cuts, marinated aubergines, and then she whipped up a fresh salad of romaine lettuce, apples and walnuts. Finally I had met with someone who appreciated fine food, someone whom I could have a normal conversation with. While I devoured the food I asked Gabrielle about her family.

We thought my mother was dead until I saw here walking through the house. Right next to where you're staying now.

My appetite stuttered. Oh, really?

She hasn't frightened you, has she? She's harmless, but a bit noisy at night. I've searched her house up and down to find her but never can. She terrified my ex-husband so much he disappeared one night. Perhaps Helene told you that. She tells everyone that. Anyways, all for the better that he left Hard to live with someone who believes in conspiracy theories, not to mention I used to suffer from obesity and weighed 320lbs. I'm 160 now, half of that. But me and him had other issues. Now I've got a boyfriend, an ex-ex-boyfriend of Helene's, by the way Not very faithful or sober, but a decent guy.

She paused to take a long drag.

Helene and Renee sure can fight eh? They'll spend a day boinking to make up for it. How long you here for?

I told her I wasn't sure, and was about to tell her more except that she didn't seem that interested. She lit another cigarette, ran her hand through her hair, exhaled. As I thought about what I could say to break the silence, there was the sound of something nudging against the front door. The handle was feebly turned over a few times.

Here we go, I told myself. Here comes the axe-wielding psychopath I should've seen coming miles off. I'll jump through that window right there and go tearing across those wheat fields on the other side of the river.

Gabrielle remained unconcerned. She walked casually over to the door and opened it. A swaying, visibly shit-faced gentlemen with bone-white hair stumbled into the house. He wore thick glasses which magnified his eyeballs, and upon entering he did an involuntary short jig caused by a loss of balance.

Who called the doctor?

Jean, sit down before you break something.

Instead of taking Gabrielle's advice, Jean careened over and began to grope her. Flinching away as if dealing with an overactive child, Gabrielle wrapped her arm around him and

man-handled him into a nearby chair, his head whipping back as he plopped down. When he noticed me he shot up in surprise, and was about to face plant until Gabrielle caught him a second time.

Oh wow! Who's that?

Gabrielle explained.

He walked over as if performing a high-wire act, with one hand outstretched far in advance.

You're...You're a man!

He was beaming with drunken idiocy. Gabrielle escorted him back to the chair while Jean began yelling something about a doctor. I took it as my chance to excuse myself. Come anytime, Gabrielle said with a wry grin, and as I shut the door behind me I heard Jean ask her, Sweetie, pumpkin, my angel, you're only screwing me, right?

The air was so misty you could see particles swarming around the lanterns like miniature snowflakes. Beyond the courtyard the same coal-black night unaffected by light of the moon or stars. Renee's car wasn't there. The lights in the stone house were off.

Before mounting the dreaded steps to the barn's landing, I walked over to the adjacent house where Gabrielle's mother, Madame Lestonnac, supposedly lived. There was a front window which usually had its curtain drawn. It was now open, and from it was a soft light coming from the end of a hallway. I cautiously peered inside, wondering if I could see the old lady in there, to see her as simply a lonely old woman rather than as a ghoul. Perhaps this is all a great misunderstanding. We just all need to get together and stop hiding.

And then, emerging gradually from the darkness, was the familiar meaty figure. She moved forward as if on a trolley until her gaping mouth began fogging up the window pane. The same chilling fear threw me up the stairs and the barn where I crashed into a table and a closet before locking myself in the room.

That was a *bad* idea. I walked in circles in my room muttering an incantation that went, oh fuck...oh fuck...oh fuck...

Sleep was sparse. The building resounded with creaks and coos and horrible noises I tried my best to ignore. At around 3 am I heard the scuffling of footsteps, then a whole racket ensued: closet doors opening, the shuffling of what I thought was a box of cutlery and china, accompanied by intermittent, wolverine-like growling which on any given night would have been unsettling. At one point she seemed to be patting the wall and scratching it. I stayed in bed, motionless, having

conversations with a God I had thought I didn't believe in.

I'm not sure what made me do it. Perhaps the sleep deprivation and the stress and the madness. Whatever it was, it made me get out of bed and say the following, in broken French:

Maam. I know this is your house and that you are probably wondering why I'm here. Well, I have a job at the Novalles Meat Plant that will last three months. I can understand why you'd be bothered by me, so I'm leaving tomorrow. The only thing is, I have to sleep. I have slept very poorly because of the many noises I hear at night. Would you be so kind as to keep the noise down? It would be greatly appreciated. Like I said, I'm leaving tomorrow, and you can have the place to yourself again.

The rummaging stopped abruptly and I heard nothing thereafter.

As if relieved of a great burden, I fell asleep within minutes. I woke up at 8 am, having slept right through my alarm. It was a slice of life. I looked out the window at the blue sky which reflected back a newfound inner calm. I washed up, packed my bags and opened the door to the barn for the last time. I was ready to walk straight out of the mill and hitch my ride to freedom, only to be pleasantly stalled. The barn had been swept and tidied up. Trunks had been pushed up against the walls, stacks of newspapers piled up in the middle of the room were now gone, and the large table in the corner had been moved to the middle of the barn. The table was covered in a red cloth and covered with a five-star breakfast spread of fresh croissants, butter and jam, fruit salad, cereals and milk and a percolator releasing plumes of coffee steam. I noticed that old picture frames of ancestors posing in front castles and lush mountain side adorned the walls. There was a card on the table. On it was written, in a tired scrawl:

Sois le bienvenue ici.

I looked about and said thank you. No response. I sat down and ate my first and last decent meal at the mill. It was all incredibly fresh and delicious. Thank you again. I heard a creak of acknowledgment from some remote corner of the barn, then I stood up and left.

I decided I would announce my departure. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but, for reasons I can't understand now, I thought it would make my exit as clean as possible. I knocked once, twice, then entered, which I'm sure to Helene constituted trespassing. There was music playing upstairs, a trashy dance tune with a chorus that sounded like men grunting in unison. I called out. No answer. I went to the top of the staircase and looked into Camille's room where the music came from. Nobody. In the kitchen I found a pad and pencil and wrote a quick note that the job ended abruptly and I had to

leave for home. It was more or less true.

I stepped into the courtyard on a foggy morning the sun was eating up, and as I passed Rocky he sneered and ran alongside the fence bucking his legs in my direction. To further compliment the demented ambiance, he had been adorned with a purple t-shirt and a tutu. I leaned over to his menacing lips.

Hey tough guy. You do realize she's got you in drag, don't you?

Rocky jerked his head back and glared at me with wild eyes. I walked on, feeling refreshed, breathing in fresh country air, the smell of dewy—

Where are you going?

Helene stood at the doorway to the stone house with her arms loose at her sides. She looked beat and ravaged. I noticed that her hands were stained a copper-brown.

I'm leaving. I left a note.

Rather than dismiss me, she took a few steps forward, then paused and lowered her head a few degrees.

Where's Renee?

She scowled. Who the hell would care about that animal? She edged closer. We inspected each other as I wondered why she wanted to hold me up. Behind me I heard Rocky's lumbering steps nearing the fence at my back. He moved close enough for me to smell his retched breath.

Yes, I'm leaving. Thank you for everything.

Just as I was about to head off, Helene hastened her steps until we were face to face.

Are you okay?

Yes, I'm okay. Are you okay?

You know, when you arrived here I knew something was wrong. To come all this way for a job, it doesn't make sense. You're hiding something.

My eyebrows raised and my mouth puckered.

What something?

Your soul carries darkness. You may have not noticed it before because it was hiding. For some reason it came out

here. But I can help you.

I decided I was going to play along.

How are you going to help me?

She stepped forward and hugged me, looking up at my face and patting my back. I had to force my arms to reciprocate the hug.

Thank you Helene. Thank you very much for your concern. I think I'll be fine.

Oh no you won't.

Oh yes I will.

Rocky was huffing against my back like a feral goon.

You can't leave here like that. Why, you're family now. You're one of us.

Her hand reached up and she cupped my cheek. The skin on her palm was rough and calloused. I slowly edged away.

It's nice of you to say that...

The lie hung in the air like a toxin. I was trying to avoid her wild eyes, and when I did look at her I saw that they were bright green, slightly bloodshot, fierce. And yet hinting they may have once been beautiful. Her lips clenched into a grin which turned into a grimace, and her hands went up behind my head and held it as one would to a newborn.

You must stay with us to rid yourself of this darkness. It is destiny. The municipal officer came by today asking about you. Did you know that you are eligible for citizenship? You are. There is just the military service to figure out. I got you the registration forms. Do not fear what I'm telling you. It is good for you. It'll turn you into a man.

I was speechless. Rather than listening to her every word I was trying to make discreet gestures that would free me from her embrace.

Uhm. Helene. Thank you for your concern, and for looking up how I can participate in the military service of this country, even though I don't belong to this country, but I really do need to get home now. Please excuse me. Again, thank you for everything. Goodbye.

The hope faded from her eyes and she clutched my arm.

You cannot run away without telling anyone. That is what savages do, and we are not savages. You cannot just

disappear. That's what Renee did. He disappeared. Now where is he? He looks upon me with shame while he hides away all his secrets. Do you think I'm something to be ashamed of?

No, not at all.

Then why are you running away from us? Is this how you treat family?

I moved my head so as to get her to remove her hand from the back of my head, but she only lowered it slightly. The pressure which she applied swayed from being gentle to constricting. As she drilled me with her question I searched for an answer to appease her, but nothing came. Why? Because you're the result of generations of psychological instability; a born predator; an overseer of chicken coops. Wacked. Loony. Psycho.

Your soul is sick and needs help. The commune administration can help you get better. But you must *not LEAVE!*

Her voice broke into a shrill. She removed her hand and took a cautious step back towards the house.

Helene, I'm...I'm not sick.

The doctors are on their way. That's how it works here.

What doctors?

The doctors are on ...

We were interrupted by a long groan, similar to the threatening sound a cat lets out when in a stand off with other felines. We both looked over toward the steps leading up to the barn and both of us let out a gasp. There on the landing was Gabrielle's mother, Madame Lestonnac, and what a hideous site she was. Her eyes were so terrifying I crossed myself a good decade since the last time I had done so. Her face was a blue pallid colour and blotchy. Her clothes were tattered and soiled. She let out the groan again, her mouth opening. With one hand on the railing she raised her wood cane and speared it in Helene's direction. Helene cowered and retreated as if a dragon had just emerged from the forest. I was so shaken I almost wanted her to stay by my side, until I noticed that Madame Lestonnac kept her gaze on Helene.

I wanted to greet her somehow, assure her that we were just having a chat, something to quell that horrific look of wrath that was giving Helene a nervous breakdown.

Oh my God...Oh my Lord...Oh no...

The way Helene's words came out in breathless spurts made me think I was going to witness a paranormal vengeance of the dead. Madame Lestonnac let out another groan which lasted longer and transformed into a high-pitched wheeze. The sound chased Helene as she bolted for the safety of her house and slammed the door behind her.

The woman's eyes softened and came back to me. She seemed to nod to assure me she was no threat, and I wanted to say something to her but when I opened my mouth I let out a gargle.

Then I heard the charge of thick hooves and looked over to see Rocky charging me, snorting and bucking in a rage caused by having seen his master defeated. I only had time to think that, out of all the ways to die, I was going to be trampled by a Shetland pony dressed for an S & M session. Then I heard a loud POK! sound. That turned out to be the sound of Rocky hitting the electric fence full on, and then in amazement I watched all 700lbs of that fat bastard flip up in the air before landing on his back with a thump, legs jabbing in the sky, tutu riding indecently up his behind. I looked back at Madame Lestonnac, who was looking at Rocky with indifference before setting her eyes back on me. She pointed to the road with her cane and shooed me away. After a pause she waved. I nodded and grinned in terror and mumbled a faint thank you that came out sounding rather queer.

I could only feign a calm walk for ten feet before I began to run the hell out of there, just in time to hear Helene begin to scream from inside the house.

And I did. I ran out of the courtyard and down the dirt road to Highway 5 where I caught a ride to the train station. It wasn't until I was in my seat with the landscape passing by that I could think about what had just happened. I drank too much coffee.

After thirty hours of travel I was back in my apartment in the city, back to traffic, streetlamps, people wandering around, the thumping of my neighbour's stereo. Back to where it all made sense. There was no use phoning the police and getting mired in all that. It was a foreign jurisdiction; it was their problem. Obviously the big contract at the meat plant was lost. Curiously enough, so did my dream of the house I wanted to buy on Weyburn road. Goes to show how trivial dreams are.

Renee was never heard from again. Years later, one of his cousins tried to contact him when on a business trip to the region, only to find out he had been missing ever since my visit. No record of him anywhere. He also looked into Helene and found out she had been charged with cruelty to animals

and was relocated by the municipal administration. Where they had relocated her to was confidential.

No mention of her kids.

All things considered, the only person I had compassion for was Madame Lestonnac. In hindsight I sometimes wonder if she really existed or if she was part of my delusions. But what would that change? If she hadn't started prowling through the barn on those dark nights, the only remaining trace of me may as well have been the mincemeat in Rocky's trough.

Justin Rossier lives in Montreal. He has been writing stories since he was nine years old. In his late teens, he began to write more prolifically as I imitated Jack Kerouac and Henry Miller. For better or for worse. Despite writing regularly throughout his twenties and early thirties, he had never sent anything to anyone. Over the last five years, he has married and has kids and settled into domestic life, expecting his aspiration to write more prolifically to be buried by diapers and a mortgage. Just as he was about to buy plaid slippers, he was surprised to find he was writing more than ever. As every person who sits there and writes knows, it can be lonely sometimes looking to connect to this elusive literary world. But then he realized readers and writers are out there doing exactly what he's been doing, and jumping in the fray brings him closer to them. Then it's worth it. Well worth it.

Copyright 2012, Justin Rossier. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.
