

TENDERNESS CAN WAIT

Translation : Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood

Chapter 1 – General Plumbing

I know that I've often lied to you. That our days together were flawed with fakery, sometimes nothing, sometimes big. I know that over the years I made you a thousand promises, said "I swear to you" a thousand times over, which won me a thousand of your sweet smiles. You always knew I was lying. And it never kept us from being happy.

This time I'm not lying.

I swear to you.

.....

From the sidewalk all you see is a huge crucifix threatening to rip out the back wall. The kind that leaves no doubt as to Christ's suffering, eight-inch nails piercing his hands and feet, and the cross, and the gyproc wall behind him. And all around it, not a thing, no counter nor clerk, no pipes nor tools. Even though the sign above the glass door reads "P. Faulkner, general plumbing".

Hanging on a string inside the door is one of those little signs with fat red letters, "Open" on one side, "Closed" on the other. It's Thursday afternoon

and, from outside, you can see the Open. I push the door, little bells jingle, I feel uncomfortable because the little bells are jingling and it's my fault.

There's a lot of that in me lately: guilt about everything and nothing, self-flagellation over the noisy details of daily life that nobody cares about at all. It will pass, it has to.

I wipe my boots off as if there was a carpet – there isn't. Jesus is staring at me, bloody guilt-tripper, and I look elsewhere, anywhere. He won't get to me, that nearly naked guy with the beard. My own personal guilt-weight is crushing me already, no need for more from an old-time superhero action figure. And in fact, I wasn't aware that religion had entered the world of plumbing. Bad timing: until quite recently I still had a thread of faith, the slim hope that someone, somewhere, was watching over me. But today my faith is empty, convinced I'm alone, that nothing, except myself, can help me.

I look around at the room. For a plumber's shop, it's cruelly bare. A battered wooden chair in the left corner and, on the back wall, on the right, an old wooden door, low and wide. Eye-balling it I'd say five by four, but I could be wrong. Heavy and grey, rusty hinges; I didn't know there was a dungeon on Drolet, south of Beaubien.

Behind that door someone coughs. A man with a loose throat, the raspy cough of an ex-smoker trying to disguise his former vice. He coughs again but the door doesn't open.

I'm curious. Despite my temporary fragility, I do want to know what's on the other side. All I really wanted was an ordinary shop, wrenches and men with worn-out fingers, all I wanted was to see tools soiled by the residues of life in Petite-Patrie, and here I am in an empty religious room. The absence of a counter, the non-existent welcome, the life-size crucifix, the minutes going by without anyone coming to greet me, all of it makes me uneasy. A little part of me wants to leave immediately, before I find myself tied to a table wearing latex chaps and a zippered mask. Before being drowned in my own blood. Before I'm asked a single question – I wouldn't know the answer, for sure.

But from the inside, hanging against the frosted-glass door, the little sign says "Closed", so I hesitate. I give the old grey door a last look. I can tell it's going to squeak.

- Scree.

The man with the cough appears, bent over in half, hugging the doorframe. He unfolds in front of me, and he is long. Seven feet, maybe, skinny as a rake. Kids must have made fun of him at school.

- Er ... Hello, I say, not laughing.

His cheeks are sunken and his chin pointy, a skeletal fortysomething, and he looks scary, a killer's face. He clears his throat.

- You need a pipe or something?

His voice sounds just like his cough.

- No, it's just that ... I was wondering if ...
- Have you got a leak that needs fixing?
- No, no, I don't need a plumber. Well as a matter of fact, my toilet ...
But that's not why I'm here.
- So why then?

He's not smiling. I'm bothering him. I look around for a Customer Service Appreciation card. I'd check "Not very satisfied". For a few seconds I tell myself that it's at times like this that I miss you. You'd feel just as uncomfortable as I do and afterwards, we'd laugh about it together.

- I ... Is there any possibility that ... Uh, do you have ... any positions to be filled?
- Any what?
- Positions.
- What?
- Um ... A job?
- Oh I get it... You want to work here.
- Yes. Well, I dunno. Is it ...
- Sit down over there.

I sit down over there. The chair has a leg that's too short. Klunk. Dilemma: should I lean backward or forward?

(My life is so exciting.)

Forward. Elbows on knees, helps look serious.

I wait and think of 8'9" Manute Bol, white version. That's my image of the lengthy stick-figure with the sunken cheeks, gone into the backstore to ask somebody something.

- Scree.

I look up. He seems to be smiling.

- The boss says to tell you to meet him at the restaurant on the corner.
- For an interview?
- Call it what you want.
- Cool! Thanks ...
- He says to tell you that if you say "position" in front of him, no way he'll hire you.

.....

Early November.

This afternoon, as soon as I felt the breezy breath of a metro entrance blowing on me, I understood that winter was here. That was its smell, warmly pressed into my face on Saint-Vallier, near Beaubien. I sniffed that orange line and knew it was here, too soon, too strong.

That, and the fact that a foot of snow fell last night.

.....

Phil Faulkner is a millionaire. I'd have thought he was poor: old shirt, dirty hair, two steamed hot-dogs – *steamies*, the poor people's way of doing food - , a messy roll of five-dollar bills. The look of somebody who sleeps on the streets.

Yet he's a millionaire. As in "I could have my hot-dogs steamed with spring water if I wanted."

- But I hate spring water, he says, noisily sipping his Diet Coke.

Seems that Phil Faulkner is a plumbing bigshot. The kind of man that nothing intimidates anymore, not even the frail lost guy who's come begging for a job. The kind of man who's been around the block.

- It was supposed to rain today, they said. A foot of snow ... I could do without it. It's bloody early this year. I had to go out to the shed to get my rubber boots, that's how not ready I was.
- Right.
- So ... You want a job?
- Yes ... But I didn't bring my résumé because ...

Because I know nothing about plumbing.

- Don't matter, I don't believe in résumés. They're for big companies who don't know how to look people in the eye anymore. What do you know how to do?
- Can I be honest?

- No choice. If you lie to me I'll know. Maybe not right now, but some day ... So ... What do you know how to do?
- Nothing.
- I don't just mean plumbing. What are you able to do, in general?
- Nothing.

.....

On the very day I decide to get a life, my feet are soaking wet. My toes are stewing in the lukewarm juice of boots with holes in them, and I'm nervous. Phil Faulkner is intimidating. I stamp my foot, fwoosh. This restaurant is nothing like the kiddie pool in Parc Beaubien where I had so much fun when I was three.

What I'm doing here. Good question (with no question mark).

I spent three months waiting for this day. The day I'd be able to get up, stand up, without caving, without crying. The day I was finally going to carry out the plan I've been ruminating for weeks. The day I was going to get out of my slump.

I got up determined, this noon, convinced that the hour of my resurrection had arrived, that this afternoon would be a milestone. I got up positive that it was time, at last, to crawl out of my hole and change everything. A new life in the world of plumbing. I saw the snow through the window and didn't even shudder. Determined, I say.

When my foot hit the first step of the stairs that had not been cleared, directly into the mailman's boot print, I heard the cries of Snap, Crackle and Pop. Snow like Rice Krispies, winter is freezing, this fall.

Given the fact that my feet have absolutely no aim, I was unable to keep following the mailman's footprints for more than two steps. A few steps more, a few steps lower down, and already the snow was infiltrating my boot.

It was a lovely little snowflake, one of the pretty ones you like to lick, that first met my sock, which also has a hole in it thanks to the nail poking out of the kitchen linoleum, near the water heater. Then another flake, not as attractive, and another. A few metres across 3rd Avenue and there was a whole gang of them rushing to my toes, snowflakes convinced, like myself, that it was much too November to be so cold.

Last spring, the sole of my right boot started to separate from the upper part. At the time, all that remained of winter were sand and gravel that gave off a nice sunny smell. You told me that I should buy new ones right away, they'd be on sale, but I didn't listen, as usual. "I'll wait till next fall" I said, and you sighed. Then summer unrolled like carpeting, slowly but with a thud at the end, and I spent every day focusing on forgetting that the sole of my right boot had separated from the upper. Last night, next fall arrived, in the form of next winter.

Hence the kiddie pool in my boot, and my toes sloshing around. A discomfort that's no help in focusing me on Phil Faulkner and his Diet Pepsi.

There's not a drop of faith left in me, but sometimes I'd like to believe in God, in his son, in all that great story, ordeal by nails. I wish I had a handle to grab onto, a tutor to help me grow straighter. But I just can't believe in them, in that. If only they'd send me a sign, maybe, an encouraging moment, but the opposite happened. On the day I finally decide to move, to go forward, to walk on water, they throw snow at me through the hole in my boot. They can go to hell.

Anyway, I wouldn't be any good at religion. I may not have much willpower, but no way I'm going to walk other people's path. So I complain, and when I see Christ on a crucifix, I look away. I'll try to be strong on my own, seeing as I have to.

So I walked over, despite the squeaking in my boot and the growing atheism. A half-hour of quietly walking in the city paralyzed in its summer tires, sundresses and closed schools. I was cold but enjoyed seeing people at their windows, looking at non-existent life outside, eyes wide, looking lost, the disheartened shovel made to wait till tomorrow. The first cold and the first snow are always more paralyzing. That's because we forget. Every molecule in our body forgets, frozen atoms, dilated pores that let the cold in like you let your uncle in at Christmas, forgetting how annoying he can be.

I walked in the crunching cold to that door that said "Open", and I opened it.

....

And here and now is where it all starts.

You who always know what to say, you'll have no reply.

...

The world of plumbing beckons. It's everything I'm not. Covered in filth, rotting water. Everything in the hands. In the gestures. In the nooks and crannies of other people's daily lives. Far away from mine, far from the thoughts that pile up in me like a shaky tower.

I need to go far. Need to plug up other people's leaks to forget all the unpatchable holes in my own skin. When the gangly stick-man with the cough in his voice asked me if I had something leaking somewhere, I wanted to smile, I held back, afraid to die. I wanted to smile because if there's anything leaking, with me, it's me. Leaking as fleeing.

It must show. Phil Faulkner is talking to me as if he's supposed to help me.

- There's no such thing as somebody who doesn't know how to do anything. Take you, for example, you're able to swallow your pride, knock at somebody's door and suck up for a job. That's already more than lots of people I know.
- Sure but it's not ...
- Whoever said that, in life, you have to be a winner (TrN: in English & italics in text) all the time? I prefer a guy who's lost and comes to see me than a fatcat who thinks he's too good to come and see me.

Faulkner talks a lot, and fast. When I lose focus because of my toes, or the piece of cole slaw on his chin, or you, I tend to skip a beat. So then I try to grab onto one word or another as it flies through the air, I try to catch the thread of the conversation, because sooner or later I'll have to reply. But he talks too fast, his breath blows too hard, and I feel even more lost. He glares at me, unamused.

- That's what I'd like to know, he adds to a sentence that escaped me.

.....

My thoughts are all over the place. The feeling that I have to say everything all at the same time, to not forget anything. My thoughts are scrambled. As if I was writing a two-second song, all the notes at the same time, what a show. My first appearance at Place des Arts will end at the same time as it begins. People in the audience won't have had time to take their seats before they start applauding - now that's the winning formula. Those guys in Kaïn had better beware.

I'm wandering again, I can't seem to help it, as if reality was evaporating, as if everything was becoming a metaphor for everything else.

A refuge.

.....

Phil Faulkner is waiting for my answer. I don't know what the question was, but here comes the life-saving waitress. Let's do a spinorama.

- Miss? An Orange Crush please.

I smile vaguely at the millionaire sitting across from me.

- I like Orange Crush, I say.

He winks at me.

- Me too.

We're brothers in Orange Crush. Starting with that, everything should go fine. I feel more confident, I sit up straighter, I look him in the eye. I have to focus, to be interested if I want to be interesting. To ooze self-confidence, even if it's fake.

- So, what were we talking about?
- I was asking you why you came to see me instead of any other plumbing shop. Where do you live?
- In Rosemont, 3rd Avenue, close to Dandurand.
- The Plomberie Fury's not far from there. Why didn't you go there? Unless you already went there and they told you to get lost?
- No, no, I never went there. You're the first one I came to see.
- Why me first, then? That's what I'd like to know.

I think about it during the opening pshitt of my can of Orange Crush –

Thanks, Miss. The long version of my answer wouldn't interest him. I edit.

- I lived across the street for eight years. When I think plumbing, I think of you. That's all. I never even thought of going anywhere else.

Phil Faulkner smiles. One of his teeth is more yellow than the others, but no big deal. I think he likes me. Slowly, we start talking, like an uncle and his nephew, about everything and nothing, about the neighbourhood, the corner *dep*, which first changed into a dollar store, then into a daycare. About Bixis that hog two parking spaces in the summertime. About snow, in the fall. I tell him about the hole in my boot, he tells me about a shoe repair shop on Beaubien. We talk about everything except plumbing, everything except him and me. Weird interview.

Then he dives into my life and I don't feel like it.

- You're educated, I can tell. I wouldn't even be surprised if you went to university.
- Yah, a bit . But uh ...I was wondering ... The crucifix in your shop ...
- What about it?
- Is it because ...
- It bothers you?
- No, no, it's just that ... it's pretty big, eh?
- That bothers you?
- No, not really.
- Do you believe in Jesus?
- Uh ... Not too much. Sometimes.
- When it suits you.
- Yah, sort of.

He's very strict-looking, the First Judgment staring right at me. Suddenly he probably likes me a little less, less than if I was going to mass every

Sunday. But I refuse to lie about that: I'd have more affection for Jesus if I could relate more to his suffering. Like if his girlfriend had dumped him, for example.

Phil Faulkner checks his watch, gets up and heads for the cash without turning around. He pays with bills awkwardly extracted from his roll of fives held together by a green elastic band. I get up too, and follow him to the door. The waitress calls out to me.

- Sir! Your Orange Crush ...?

Faulkner turns around and looks at me, laughter in his voice.

- You thought I payed for you?

- Uh ...

- I didn't get rich by buying drinks for my employees.

- Uh ...

- You start next Monday. Dress up a bit.

- Why?

That's the first thing that crossed my skull – why. As if it was important. I had just been hired for the job of my dreams – last night's – and I was already second-guessing my boss.

- Because I said so!

I hang my head, a bit ashamed. While Faulkner leaves the restaurant without looking at me, I search my pockets, fish out a toonie, slide it onto the counter, near the cash.

- Keep the change.

I'm big, me. I've got a job.

Outside, where my soaking foot re-encounters the melting flakes, Phil Faulkner is smoking a menthol cigarette. I didn't think he'd waited for me, but there he is, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Looking puzzled, he points at me with his cigarette.

- OK, so you don't know how to do anything, but what were you doing, before? To make a living, I mean.

Chapter 2 – Bearded Ladies and Smooth-Cheeked Men

This place is a real circus.

With all the necessary clowns, elephants, bimbos that aren't that pretty wearing clothes that are way too skimpy, lions with razor-sharp fangs, fiery hoops, huge deformed heads and cookbooks.

Welcome to the Salon du livre de Montréal. Where lungs breathe air that's too dry, where the carpets are charged with static electricity and where all-you-can-grab bookmarks abound. Where people will step on each other's feet just to see the same books as in Renaud-Bray bookstores.

And me, in this circus? I'm the fellow who, under the marquee of this freak-show, shoots himself in the temple with a nail gun and survives – *barely*.

(Tr. N: in English and italics in the text) This is my sixth salon de Montréal as a writer. The first five were a pain; this one should be great. Or not.

Somebody kill me!

I've been sitting behind my little table for an hour and fifteen minutes, ballpoint in hand, a half smile on my face, Hello m'am. Oh, she wasn't really looking at me. Hello sir, yes, I wrote these novels. Goodbye sir. Hello again, m'am. No, I don't know where the ladies' room is.

It's hot in here.

How can the aisles be so crowded, hundreds of thousands of people everywhere, and so few wanting to meet me? How can minutes be so long, filled with seconds that so perpetually take their time?

I put my nail gun away. New strategy: I'll commit suicide by explosion of the bladder, not by choice but by embarrassment. When someone looks in my direction, I feel bad for not doing anything, hands idle, gaze empty, flat smile. So I drink. A sip of water, another sip of water, every time an eye seems about to look my way, I lift the glass and drink. Three litres, four litres, I'm about to die, burst, thank you, thank you.

Then I imagine the headline – page 17 of my neighbourhood paper: Rosemont writer dies drowned in his piss at the book fair. And my plan feels a little less attractive. I'm sure I'll come up with something more glorious. Meanwhile, I get up and ask another writer who is also doing an autograph session where the toilets are.

Sweet revenge.

....

If I sound like I'm feeling sorry for myself, that's because I am.

But I have nothing to feel sorry for, on the contrary. I'm a quasi-known writer. I sell more novels than the guy at the next table. In one hour and a half session, I regularly sign fifteen books. There are even readers – male and female – waiting for me when my session starts, others bring their book from home, nicely dog-eared. I'm lucky. I should appreciate it.

But it's a life I just don't enjoy. Sitting here hurts, year after year. There are nails on my chair, and I'm no fakir. Unknowns who don't know me get on my nerves. Unknowns who do know me intimidate me. I never know what to say, what to do, what to write. I'm neither a salesman nor a window display. I'm the guy who would like to not be here. It's not the readers' fault; generally speaking they're quite nice. It's all my fault; generally speaking I'm quite a jerk. It all stresses me out for weeks and by the time I get to my stand for my first session, I'm already dead. Six years, three novels, and always this uneasiness, this fatigue, this crap weekend every late November.

.....

From a distance, from the back of the stand across the aisle, a girl is looking at me and smiling. I raise my glass (my hydrating reflex kicking in) and bring it to my lips, hoping that the sip and swallow will take long enough for her to disappear. When I put my glass back down on the table and look up, she's still looking at me, but from close-up. She walks toward me, visibly

pleased to have found me. In her hands is my latest novel. I smile politely. She finally reaches my table, and I get all confused: from close-up she seems to be a guy. Seems to be. I'm not sure.

- Hello, I say in a random voice.
- Hi, he/she answers with much too much enthusiasm and in a his/hers voice.

Everything about this person is neutral. Not the least accessory, piece of clothing, not a hump or bump to help determine if the *read-* part is followed by a -er or a -(h)er.

He/she holds out his/her/my novel.

- It's for a signing.
- It's a pleasure.

But not that much ... My underarms are sweating and I take the cap off my ballpoint.

- What's your name?
- Frankie. Francis.

Shit.

I write it "Francis" but it could just as well be "Frances". What a lousy occupation: when I signed my first publishing contract, nobody told me about this part. I look around for somebody I know, my editor, or the

young woman who brings me litre after litre of water. I need an outside opinion as to this person's sex. But not. Neither water pusher nor word pusher. Everybody's busy not giving a damn, and I can't wait any longer.

- Er ... How do you spell that?

Did I really ask that?

- Well ... Normal, like.

Oh *fuck* it. (Tr.N. In English & italics in the text) Today will be the day I start signing the same way doctors write out prescriptions. A series of illegible scribbles, starting with a 'Francis' that stops at the c, then stretches out in a long wavy line all the way to the margin. Followed by bits of meaningless words, something that looks like "Enjoy the book", and ending with an illiterate signature. There.

- Thank you!!!

With three exclamation marks in his/her voice, Francis/-es takes the book and walks away, touched, until he/she opens it a few metres farther and reads my inscription. A smirk, a shake of the head, enthusiasm deflated.

And for me, more water.

It's no big deal, I know. Not Afghanistan, nor even profs who don't know how to write properly. Just one detail among others in my life. But it's my life, my detail, the one that destroys me, like all the others. An army of

despicable details, and this skin I'm so uneasy in, and the moments of discomfort, by the dozen, every salon, every year. And the rest of the time too.

All of that isn't for me.

I'd so love to be somewhere else. In my bed or in the metro, or under the metro. Dead writers are lucky; they don't have to show up at book fairs. They die, make a last brief appearance at a salon – aka funeral parlour – and aren't even expected to smile.

.....

“To Emily,

“Hoping this book brings you some comfort during these difficult times,

“Enjoy

Lousy inscription. The girl tells me she's just been dumped by her boyfriend, that she heard that my second novel might cheer her up, so I write her something as trite as that. Pitiful.

And if, alas, the girl happens to be cute, I try to make small talk while I write, and the dedication falls apart:

“To Emily,

“Hopin this bock brang you some of good during these moments difficulty.

“Enjoy

“XX”

Yes, with kisses. She thanks me and, as she walks away, opens the book to read my words. Disappointed. A smirk, a shake of the head, enthusiasm deflated.

And for me, a big gulp.

Of vodka, ideally.

.....

I drank a whole lake, scribbled in a few books, distributed mostly false smiles. I answered everybody's questions, made a mess of telling the story of each one of my novels to people who couldn't care less. I extracted fifteen, perhaps twenty, nails from my head. I said Good Luck to a guy who felt he was a better writer than I am and deserved to be published more than I am. I coughed. I uncapped and recapped my ballpoint four-thousand times. And now I'm restless: two more minutes and it'll be over. But a rather lovely young woman is approaching.

- I've read all your books. They're not bad.
- Uh ... Thank you, I guess.
- Can I take your picture?
- Sure ...

So I smile, ready for the little birdie to pop out, but what appears is the friend hiding behind her. She grabs the camera and waits while Miss they're-not-bad comes around behind the table and stands next to me.

- Stand closer together, says the friend.
- Sure ...

It's always the same with photos. I never know if I should put my arm around the girl's shoulder or not.

I wish I had no arms.

How do you jerk off with no arms?

I wish I were dead.

Chapter 3 – Twits Who Write Novels about Guys who Write Novels

Phil Faulkner is shivering in front of the shop door that wears his name. That'll teach him to ask me how I was earning my living before I wanted to become a plumber. I told him my story, as quickly as I could. Snot running down my nose.

- Come on in a bit, he says. I'm freezing. Might as well introduce you to the folks here, while we're at it.

He pushes the door and signals for me to follow him. I follow him. This time the dungeon-like space doesn't intimidate me, nor does the emptiness of the room nor the chair with the gimpy leg. Even Jesus doesn't bother me any more. I stare at him and realize he's suffering more than I am, up there on

his yellow wall. I take my coat off. Faulkner looks me up and down, looking a bit disgusted.

- You really do have to dress better.

I don't respond. This is my best sweater, so this is upsetting. Mentally reviewing my wardrobe, I realize I'll have to go shopping this coming weekend, and the thought of going shopping alone combined with the idea of disgusting my new boss makes me feel intimidated all over again – as solid as a rock, me.

- Sorry, I say, though I'm not sure why.
- Don't apologize, but don't ever wear that sweater again.
- Uh ... O.K.
- So, you write books?
- Yes. Novels.
- Have I ever heard of them?
- Do you read a bit?
- No.
- Well then, no, I guess not.
- What're they about?
- Well ... uhm ... They're about ...`

People have been asking me that for six years, and for six years I've not known what to answer. Because they're about nothing. The nothing that crushes our daily lives. The nothing that grips our windpipes. That shoots us dead one after the other before we can even see the weapon come out. The

Jesse James brand of nothing that makes you hug the walls as soon as a girl doesn't want us anymore, or wants us too much.

But you can't really say that, just like that, with snot running down your nose and a sweater that's way too shabby.

- It's about love, but not in a corny way.
- Love? That's a bit ...
- Yeh, a bit ...
- Did you sell more than two?

He looks like he doesn't believe me, but I am a real author. Who writes nice things. Not one of those twits who write novels about a guy who writes novels.

- They're good novels, the ones I write. I earn my living doing it, that's pretty rare here in Québec. I even got some starred reviews in *Voir*. (TrN: free Montréal cultural weekly)
- How many?
- I don't really remember, but there were some stars. And they talked about me in *Châtelaine* too.
- I don't read it.
- No, I don't either but ...
- O.K., I get it. For a nobody (TrN: in English in the text), you're somebody.

For a nobody, I'm somebody. There you go, that's it.

Like all of us.

.....

I blow my nose. Phil Faulkner's feet squelch across the floor. He knocks on the dungeon door, waits a few seconds as he wipes his nose with his sleeve. The long tall toothpick with the killer's face appears.

- Go get Pat, Faulkner orders, and immediately shuts the door.

Silence. I don't know where to look. There's nothing to look at. A dead spider in the corner. A screw sprouting out of the wall. A light wind, translucent presence of today's cloudy outdoors. Faulkner clears his throat. I lift my head.

- You'll pick it up as you go along.

I nod, a quarter smile politely placed on the bottom part of my face. I imagine that what I'll need to pick up lies on the other side of that little door I've decided to stare at, for lack of anything else.

- Scree.

When I come in on Monday I'm bringing a can of WD-40 for the hinges. It's important to be proactive. That's what a Human Resources guy told me before dying of boredom (TrN: in English and italics in the text) preparing paycheques.

So the door creaks for one of the last times in its life. The tall shady character emerges, followed by the most neutral guy in the world. Slightly chubby, five foot seven and a half, glasses that were in style six years ago, short-sleeved shirt, empty gaze, charisma in the minus column. Fits my exact image of a Patrick, in fact. On a scale from zero to George Clooney, a girl would probably give him a B. Which means nothing, I know – I'm getting nervous in a small room with three men I don't know, including a killer and a millionaire, so I start thinking in a random way. Plus, during at least three whole seconds, nobody says a word. They stare at me, all three of them, looking like they're wondering why I'm wasting their time. I start shaking, not knowing if I should talk to them or roll up in a little ball, companion to the deceased spider.

Finally, Phil Faulkner coughs, smiling, clearly proud of the dramatic effect of his imposed silence.

- Guys, let me introduce you to the writer. He's gonna work with us starting Monday.

Then he turns to me while pointing in the general direction of his associates.

- This is Patrick, Pat, and you've already met Mustache.

Mustache doesn't wear a mustache but I don't dare ask. I shake their outstretched hands and when the fleshless digitiform digital bone digits of the man called Mustache grab my hand, his face lights up with a smile that immediately – and surprisingly – makes him likeable. It's like *Extreme*

Makeover of the Face (TrN: in English & italics in the text). The same guy who looked like a killer just a few minutes ago now looks like one of those guys you see on the street and you just want to go over and hug him – not that that’s ever happened to me but I watch a lot of TV.

- Welcome aboard.
- Thanks.
- Welcome, mutters Patrick, visibly annoyed to have shifted himself for so little.

The two men quickly dive back into the dungeon, leaving me alone with Phil Faulkner.

- They seem nice, I say.
- Don’t be fooled by appearances.
- I ...
- There’s Marie-Claude too, but she’s off today. I’ll introduce you Monday.
- O.K.
- How does thirty-five thousand sound?
- Thirty-five thousand what?

Faulkner bites his upper lip.

- Are you sure you’re a writer? You don’t seem too smart to me.
- I could introduce you to a whole bunch of writers who aren’t too smart ...
- Seems like I’ve got one in my face already.

- No, that's not what I ...

Fuck. (TrN: in English & italics in the text) If he had liked my sweater, I'd be full of self-confidence, and in one reply I'd show him I'm not such a jerk. But he intimidates me and everything comes out all wrong. Ugly sweater, low intelligence, wild bit of hair sticking up, all factors in the destruction of my self-esteem.

That's your fault.

Even the memory of your prettily snarky air when I said something stupid doesn't help lift my morale. It makes me smile, but I feel sad. That's even worse.

Faulkner flattens my false happiness.

- I was talking salary, he says, as nastily as he can.
- Uh. Yeh, sure, perfect.

I hadn't really thought about it. And anyway, I suspect that a millionaire who won't buy his employees an Orange Crush can't be too open to negotiation. He holds out his hand. I shake it as hard as I can, with the budding virility of the neo-plumber.

- There's just one more thing I'd like to know, Faulkner announces.
- Yes?
- If you write books, and you're doing well ...
- Yes?

- Why change jobs?

I think about it for a second.

- I don't like writing. No, in fact, writing is o.k. What I don't like is everything that comes with it. Book fairs, signings, all that stuff.

Now it's Phil Faulkner's turn to ponder.

- That's what you tell yourself. What's the real reason?

XXXXXXXXXXXX