



high-wire summer

Louise Dupré

Stories translated by Liedewy Hawke

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For Cécile

For Jean-Paul,

Louise,

Alain,

Nicole

*There is definitely a connection between the journey
and the body, and the sea we behold, we lose sight of,
we tirelessly seek.*

— SYLVIE MASSICOTTE

Au pays des mers

PRELUDE

STEP BY STEP

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

YOU SHOULD BEGIN. JUST WRITE one sentence. Others are sure to join it, and then others, followed by more sentences. You would eventually have a text. You aren't asking of yourself that you write a great text, but simply a text, one that holds together. Yet the computer screen remains empty. Empty and grey. It's not for lack of trying. Until now, you haven't been able to see yourself as a woman who could leave everything behind, who could go off to start a new life, board a ship hoisting an unknown flag, sail away to explore islands at the ends of the earth.

You may as well admit it — you don't belong to the race of adventuresses. Neither does your mother, nor your grandmother. Still, there was that woman among your ancestors who came and settled in New France at the age of sixteen with her second husband. She would have four husbands. Her son François accompanied Joliette on his expeditions. And her great-great-grandson Bruno went to New York to study at a time when few people studied.

Something has been lost in the family. You have all become sedentary, you don't know why. Fear perhaps, an old fear that rivets you to your lives. An ancient memory, the word

catastrophe, tattooed onto your skin in large letters, causing your heart to beat wildly at night, in your dreams. When you wake up, faceless shadows linger on your bedroom walls. Lying very still, you patiently wait for them to fade. You have learned to cultivate patience as others do orchids.

It's pointless to keep trying — you won't be able to write this text. You decide to close the file so you can open another one, the file of your novel, where women appear who dare to start over. Anne, for example, a Martin, like your grandmother. Anne did decide to leave everything behind. Her work, her friends, her mother. It took a great deal of courage. Or humility. One morning she realized that even without her, the world would go on turning. She wasn't able to make other people happy, so why not make herself happy?

You aren't quite so humble. Or else your family is tactful enough to make you think they need you. You are happy, as happy as someone who isn't totally deluded can be. Perhaps that is why it has never occurred to you to walk away from it all. You like your life, even with the darkness you carry inside you, the darkness that would follow you even if you took refuge in the heart of some faraway desert. One can run away from one's parents, husband, children, country, one can leave one's heart behind, but not one's soul.

You travel, of course. You have visited crowded cities and picture-postcard landscapes, you have swum in the same sea as Ulysses, and like Proust you have admired Vermeer's *View of Delft*, but you always come back to your home base, this

house whose walls you carefully painted yourself. This is where you write. In the morning you sit up in bed, with your dictionaries, and your small world fills up, you dream in the company of characters you would like to meet. Sometimes you have them do things you've never had the courage to do yourself and you are joyful until bedtime. As if you briefly opened a window on the woman you could have been in another life, someone you barely knew.

You won't say that fiction creates you — you'd feel as though you repeated the clichés one reads in rushed interviews. You couldn't stop writing, even if you were offered all possible lives. Writing actually takes up more and more space in your days. It is always with you, it fights the darkness that sometimes spreads through your whole body. You see yourself as a tightrope walker who is slowly, intently, crossing the ring on her wire, but there is no one there to cheer you on. You go forward alone.

But you *are* going forward, step by step. You continue on your way. You will live to a ripe old age without ever casting off your moorings, like the last women of your line. Is that so bad? Will you feel regret as your hand freezes forever on the keyboard of a computer? You don't think so, but who knows what will go through your mind then? You may suddenly be sorry you weren't one of those flamboyant women you admire, on rainy evenings, in television reports.

You often say one should strive to discover all the possibilities of one's writing. Doesn't the same hold true for one's

life? You are ready to admit that now, even though you have difficulty writing it down. Already you turn around to look a long way back, and what you see is an unflattering image of yourself. Nevertheless, you will shape it into sentences, since you have no choice. You promised to write this text and you have always tried to keep your word. So you may as well begin.

I

A HAPPY BABEL

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

WE WOULDN'T BE BORED — ENDLESSLY, hopelessly bored, like the summer before. The corner restaurant, the dance hall on Saturday night after the workweek at the playground, always the same conversations. A few months back, the word *Expo* had entered our vocabulary. It fired our imaginations, like the documentaries about Africa shown at school — women with ebony skin, their dresses so flowery they looked indecent. Our own mothers went to Mass in suits adorned with a string of fake pearls. In our orderly world, we were more conscious of the Puritan roots of the Loyalists than of the Quiet Revolution. We listened to Adamo, the Beatles, Claude Léveillée, but didn't know how to say *free love* or *contraception*, let alone *abortion*.

It would be a summer of discoveries. We knew it. We sang *Un jour, un jour* and pictured ourselves already in Montréal. We would take the metro to the islands for the first time, we'd spend the day in exotic surroundings, eat strange food, meet people we never mixed with at home. We would become teenagers who have travelled, like the daughters of ambassadors, adventurers, millionaires. Or like those beautiful hostesses we saw on television. Barely older than us, they looked straight at the camera like women. We didn't

know what that stemmed from: their designer outfits, the fact they spoke English, or some other knowledge, an intimate one, so intimate we didn't dare hint at it among ourselves. Suddenly the world was opening up. Or it had shattered, rather, like a china ornament, revealing other, unsuspected worlds. One could live differently, dress differently, love without fear, without regrets. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Expo was the bus chartered by the Playgrounds Association, a two-hour ride, the fun of travelling with friends, a whole day of pure delight, a spot even more beautiful than on photographs, long lines of cars, and patient waiting, since we weren't as lucky as Montréalers. They took the metro and away they went ... twenty minutes later they stood in front of the French or British Pavilion. They could come during the week. Many had even bought a passport. One woman told us with a radiant smile that she came every Thursday.

I'd felt a twinge of longing. Some day I, too, would live in a big city. I would have money, I'd have the leisure to see all the shows I wanted. I would go on holiday to the most faraway countries, Thailand and Japan. *Education is the gateway to opportunity*, teachers kept telling us. All we needed to do was study: Latin, Greek, English and literature. Yes, literature promised us a never-ending Expo. So many writers had travelled! I would wind up in countries resembling those of the pavilions I visited almost religiously that summer. Like everyone else of my generation, I would be invincible. Life would bring me

no unpleasant surprises. I would carry out my wildest plans. I would follow the example of those who had boldly created an island so they could build the eighth wonder of the world. Québec even had its own pavilion, as if it were a country ...

That summer lingers in my memory as a time of unbridled enthusiasm, of rock-solid faith. On my way home from my town, I begin to smile as soon as the bus drives onto the Jacques-Cartier Bridge. As I crane my neck towards the dirty window, I attempt to revive old images. A sculpture, a painting, a dish sampled at the India Pavilion, the evenings at La Ronde with my pals. But nothing appears. Only hazy, fleeting impressions. The exhilaration I'd felt in the metro, which I would feel again on my first flight, a few years later. The sensation of freedom as I found myself in a crowd where nobody knew me, the thrill of belonging to a human community with billions of faces I wanted to be radiant. I cannot recall ever giving a thought to poverty, slavery, or suffering at Expo. Perhaps because I didn't wish to. What I saw was a clean, reassuring world, quite safe on islands protected by the lazily flowing St. Lawrence.

We, too, were protected, we felt. It never occurred to us we might run into crooks, or perverts. We talked to anyone who knew French. And we put into practice our English classes. *Where are you from? Is it your first trip in Canada?* Often, we exchanged addresses, a telephone number. *If you come to Germany, call me. Of course.* We now had friends from Los Angeles to Tokyo. When I got home, I locked their names away in a

little box. I can't recall what I did with it — probably lost it during one of my many moves. I know I didn't throw it away because I would have remembered. After forty years one can't really be sure of anything, though.

I do have one totally sharp, vivid memory. Expo was drawing to an end. It was my great friend Luce's birthday and her parents had driven us to Montréal. We had mapped out a precise itinerary for ourselves. We wanted to visit all the pavilions we hadn't seen yet — never mind that the waits grew longer and longer as the season advanced. I can't remember at what pavilion we were lining up, but Luce and I had been waiting for at least two hours, while a hostess was doing her best to entertain us. She encouraged people of different nationalities to sing a song from their country. Most of them cheerfully complied. Then, perhaps at the end of her tether, she hit upon an idea: to ask those whose birthday it was to raise their hand. I pointed to my friend. Immediately a glorious cacophony rang out. It rose into the air, sent a thrill through Île Notre-Dame, swept us up in its joyfulness. The crowd sang "Happy Birthday" to Luce in every possible language.

Our eyes filled with tears. Luce and I were deeply moved. This was a happy Babel, a Babel at last reconciled. At peace. Man and his World. We would never forget it. Never, ever forget that blessed moment, September 11, 1967. From then on, September 11 would symbolize our highest hopes.