

Precipice

1.

When Roger awakes, he notices two men conversing at the foot of his bed. Moments ago, he had been skiing—a pleasant dream, or a memory—and now he is lying down, nauseous and disoriented.

“*Ce mec a très bien sû les dangers de l'hors piste,*”¹ says the shorter and stockier of the two men. He is darkly tanned, wearing a white ski cap and red sweater. Something prevents Roger from lowering his chin, so he can see more of the men. He lifts his right hand to rub his eyes; it catches with a metallic *clink* and a sharp pain in the top of his wrist. The noise alerts both men, who turn their attention to Roger.

“*Allo,*” says the taller, lankier man. A cigarette dangling from his lips flings ash as he speaks. He has the body of a long-distance runner, skinny but muscular forearms, long legs. Leathery skin stretched over a hairless skull. The collar of his white shirt is open, sleeves rolled up to the elbow; a narrow blue tie hangs loosely, extending past the belt of his jeans. “Do you feel like talking?” he asks, with a nasal, British public-school accent. He smiles, and lets the cigarette drop to the floor. The stocky man makes a show of folding his arms.

Roger looks around the room. On his right, well-stocked bookshelves. To his left, metal-framed photos of mountains and skiers line the wall. His neck and eyes itch. Blinking

¹“This jerk very well knew the dangers of skiing out-of-bounds.”

helps, temporarily. He lifts his left arm, feels a pinch of pain just above the wrist, where an IV protrudes. The tube stretches just enough for him to rub his eyes, but not to scratch beneath the brace that covers his neck chin-to-sternum. Behind him are windows on each side of the bed; the light level suggests an overcast day—or thin curtains that have been drawn. On the table to Roger's left, next to a box of tissues and a cup of water, is a paperback copy of his best-selling 2006 travel book, *The Remaining Few*, which documented his observations —anchored by a fictional plot—of the most remote inhabited areas on earth. A bestseller, translated into 33 languages. The tall man offers to summon a doctor or nurse. When he snaps his fingers, the stocky man leaves. As he exits, Roger takes a slow, deep breath; before he can finish, his vision blurs and darkens.

He is back skiing, in knee-deep powder, behind two other skiers. His gut reacts to the series of slow-motion trampoline jumps as he descends; each adrenaline-pumped turn defies gravity and then succumbs to it. Far ahead is a deep, snowless valley; higher up, rocky needles of black granite jutting above snowfields. In front of him is his wife, Carol. In front of her, their guide, Gilles. The landscape is of the mountains surrounding Chamonix, France, the spiritual center of mountain climbing and extreme skiing, nestled below the Aiguille de Midi, the shoulder of Mont Blanc, and the famous *needles* of the Mont Blanc Massif. Over his right shoulder, the Aiguille Verte, the Aiguille Rouge straight ahead. Between them the formidable Dent du Geant, and the pointiest needle of them all, the Dru.

As the slope steepens, his eyes pop open—and his ears: to the raw hum of air conditioning, distant laughter, the ding of an elevator. The lights above him buzz; high-pitched pings filter through the mix of sounds.

“Hello again. Do you know where you are?” says the tall man, in a genial tone, suggesting sympathy.

“Chamonix,” says Roger.

“That was before. Now you are in Les Houches, at the Clinic d’Élancourte,” says the tall man. “At first everyone thought your neck was broken, but it's just a severe bruise. A concussion, thought to be severe, turned out to be slight. You are a very lucky man, Mr. Nettles. For the past 24 hours you have been in and out—mostly out—of consciousness. Over-medicated, it turns out, considering your injuries are minor.”

The stocky man re-enters the room with a doctor. “*Ça vaut la peine d’encore essayer?*”² says the tall man to the physician, who shrugs his shoulders. “So, back to the beginning, eh? I am Emil Gaston, Inspecteur de Police de la Prefecture à Haute Savoie.” He points to the stocky man. “This is Yann Cathou. He is with the Guides des Hautes Montagnes.” The detective gestures to the doctor. “And this is Dr. Bertrand Petit.” The doctor has a classic Gallic profile: hook nose, thin lips, sharp chin. Inserting himself between Roger and the Inspector, he presses a button on the side railing that raises Roger's head. The doctor examines the hanging bag above Roger’s IV, and the tube connecting the two. He turns a valve and the drip stops.

“Now that we have the negative imaging results, we are taking you off the drugs,” says Dr. Petit. A nurse appears and sets about removing the IV from Roger’s wrist. The doctor unfastens the stays on the front of the neck brace, gently lifting Roger’s head, and asks if there is any pain. Freed from the inhibiting device, Roger twists his head left and right. He sees what is restraining his right wrist.

² “Is it worth trying again?”

He is handcuffed to the bedrail.

Dr. Petit informs Roger that he will be released from the clinic later today. “Refrain from vigorous activity for two weeks,” he adds as he leaves. The nurse follows him out, wheeling the IV stand. The guide makes room for her to pass. His physique is that of a body builder; the bright red sweater, tightly bound to his chest and shoulders, hangs loose below the waist. He cracks the knuckles of several of his thick fingers and uses them to comb back his block of black hair. His expression remains unchanged, stern. Intense blue eyes, high cheekbones and bushy, low eyebrows reinforce the severity.

The Inspector picks up Roger’s book and flips thru pages to a place that is bookmarked. “I’ve been reading your book,” he says, face animated with delight. “*The Remaining Few*, by Roger Nettles. Over 1 million copies sold worldwide. This happens to be my copy,” he adds, holding the book up so Roger can see the cover with the gold *copies sold* blurb. “Here is a phrase I admired: *Suffocated by the unyielding fog, choked by the relentless green!* My God, the things you can say in English! It’s quite the best language for making sense of the world. And you are quite the writer, Roger.” He sets the book gently on the foot of the bed. Roger ignores the flattery; combined with the familiarity of using Roger’s first name, he interprets the Inspector’s *politesse* as a thin disguise for sarcasm, given also the menacing scrutiny of the oafish Yann.

A sense of dread mixes with the remnants of nausea. The handcuffs scream for an explanation. Roger assumes they are related to the fate of Gilles Villeneuve, the personal guide he and Carol hired for day three of their vacation, and who came to their aid at the end of their ill-advised, unguided, off-piste run, on day four. The Inspector would already know this: that the run resulted in the injuries to Carol and himself, which led to the rescue effort, which in turn ended with Gilles hurtling further down the icy precipice, out of sight and onto the Argentière

Glacier a hundred feet below them. Minimally, the handcuffs signify that an inquiry is underway concerning Gilles, and that Roger, having failed to secure a Carte Neige for either himself or Carol, is going to incur all the costs of their evacuation—search and rescue personnel, equipment, helicopter and ambulance transport, hospital fees—plus a significant fine; in total, Roger faces a payment of more than 10,000 francs. Local authorities could be forgiven for suspecting an American tourist facing such a financial burden might be a flight risk. But Roger is certain that the Inspector is preparing for a deeper inquiry. More than likely Gilles was badly injured in the fall. Could the Inspector be considering some kind of reckless endangerment charge as well, given Roger's willful decision to forgo the proper insurance protocol?

As if Gaston has been reading Roger's mind, he says, "Regarding the tragic accident." He pauses to move the book from the foot of the bed back to the table. "With all such incidents, interested parties insist there be someone to blame; fault found, and consequences assigned. Gilles was a beloved guide, Mr. Nettles. He had a wife and family. Perhaps he was negligent. Perhaps there were extenuating circumstances. Regardless, his death is being treated as suspicious, and you are a material witness." *Was*. Gaston has confirmed what Roger had suspected: sometime in the last 48 hours, Gilles Villeneuve died from injuries sustained in his fall. Implied as well is that the Inspector has already vetted his wife, while he was heavily sedated. She saw Gilles disappear over the precipice, but not what caused the fall. Therefore, it will be up to Roger to tell the story of Gilles' last moments. "Had you not been injured you and your wife would have been detained in my precinct. Now that you are both on the mend, as they say, we need a clear scenario of the events to which only you were a witness." The Inspector's remarks suggest the emotional core of local residents' concern: refusal to accept that an experienced, veteran guide might have been to blame for his own death, negligent in some way,

acting out of character. Finding fault elsewhere would preserve the man's reputation, imbue his ceremony and burial with the proper aura of honor and sacrifice. Suspicion had fallen to the foreigner. Still, were handcuffs necessary?

The Inspector misinterprets the strain evident on Roger's face. "*Alors, veuillez m'excuser.*"³ Of course you want to know about your wife," he says softly. "She has a broken left tibia and has torn her medial collateral ligament. She is in a cast, but otherwise healthy. She is, however, very unhappy. Not so much about the leg injuries or even the circumstances that led to them, but something more personal, I believe." The Inspector pauses. Roger wonders if the pause is meant to unnerve him. "She made a most valiant effort to be helpful. But about the critical moments before Gilles' fall, we must rely on you."

Roger sits up, presses the button to raise his back further, and with his free hand adjusts the pillow supporting his neck. He breathes in, slowly, self-consciously. "What would you like to know, Inspector?"

The Inspector pulls up a chair and extracts a small notepad and pen from his shirt pocket. "Excellent!" he says, flipping open the pad and clicking the pen. At the doorway, Yann clears his throat. His dour expression suggests he is unenthusiastic about what is to come. "*Enfin,*"⁴ he mumbles, just before he leaves.

2.

³ "Oh my, please excuse me."

⁴ "Finally,"

Gaston begins writing in his notepad before he speaks. “If you don’t mind,” he says. “Before we record your statement, I would like to ask you a few questions for background.”

“Of course.” Roger presses the button to lift his torso even further. When his head reaches the same level as the Inspector’s, he stops.

“What was the purpose of your trip to Chamonix?” The Inspector writes at a rapid pace, in longhand. He keeps his eyes on the notepad.

“Vacation, pure and simple.”

“Yes...vacation. Not research? You are not preparing another book?” The Inspector stops writing and looks up, pen still pressed to paper.

Roger knows where this is headed. Gaston’s acknowledgement that he has already spoken to Carol means the question is disingenuous. “No, not a book. An article for a travel magazine. But the idea for the article came only after we had made arrangements to come here on vacation. And in light of what’s happened, I won’t be writing anything.”

The Inspector returns his focus to the notepad, writing as he speaks. “I understand that articles such as this are how you make your living now, *n’est-ce pas*? How very thoughtful of you to—not to—profit off the misfortune of others in this instance.” He stops writing again, and asks, “Your wife, she is twenty years your junior, yes?” says the Inspector. More disingenuousness, thinks Roger. The Inspector knows the answer. “Your passport says you are forty-eight.”

“And Carol is twenty-five,” says Roger. He needn’t have said anything. He understands that the Inspector wants him to be irritated. To provoke a miscalculation, to put Roger’s mental energy into managing the interaction—the emotional dissonance—instead of the content of the

story the Inspector will be maneuvering to extract from him. “Married four years ago. Her first. My second,” he volunteers.

“For you, *une crise de la mi-vie, peut-etre*.⁵,” says the Inspector. “In France this is not so unusual. The opposite is also true. Young men married to older women. A change of life, open to either sex.” He turns his head at the sound of the door opening behind him.

A nurse enters the room and places a tray of food—bagel, assorted cheeses, orange juice, jello, a bag of apple slices—on the table, nudging Roger’s book to a precarious position at the edge. Behind the nurse, the guide Yann Cathou has returned with an iPad and a microphone. He pulls up a chair just behind Gaston, places the iPad on his lap when he sits, and sets the microphone on top of Roger’s book. Gaston raises his pen and notepad; Yann reacts with a foul “Auoof” expression on his face, and gestures with his hands. He taps the iPad with a stubby finger and sits back, folding his arms across his chest.

Roger reflects on the likelihood of Carol having mentioned the friction between the two of them, simmering for over a year. She was weary of the travel. She wanted to start a family. Perhaps this had coalesced into the ‘unhappiness’ the Inspector was referring to, or perhaps the Inspector had just inferred as much. Regardless, Roger cannot object to this personal line of questioning without appearing hostile. He covers his true feelings with a show of being hungry, though his appetite has not returned.

“Did she tell you she spent her junior year abroad in the south of France?” asks Roger, wanting to appear cooperative. He tests his appetite by taking a small bite from a gooey wedge of brie. “She speaks French fluently—which I do not—and loves French culture. Coming here was actually her idea. I agreed because I—” Gaston raises his hand like a traffic cop and lowers it

⁵ “A mid-life crisis, perhaps.”

quickly to keep writing. When he raises his hand again, he twirls his wrist like a ballerina, indicating Roger can continue. “She had missed out on the skiing experience back then, and I—” Roger sees Cathou roll his eyes. “Well, I wanted to make her happy.” Surprisingly, the pungent aroma of the brie revives him, and he savors the rest of the wedge. If he had felt unequal to the task of making a full statement to the Inspector upon awakening, he feels no such qualms now. The sour-faced Cathou cracks his knuckles again.

If pressed by the Inspector, how far down the twisted path of their deteriorating relationship might Carol have ventured? Would she have mentioned that she had stopped using birth control a year and a half ago? Probably. Had she talked about how—despite a specialist’s reassurances—she had begun to lose hope of ever becoming pregnant? More than likely. Would she have confessed how the mere thought of adoption depressed her? The thrill of speaking French again would have loosened her tongue as surely as a strong Eau de Vie. What more recent intimate details might she have shared? Perhaps how she’d been sick the night of their arrival, gone immediately into the bathroom to throw up—while he’d remained on the balcony of their hotel room, talking her through what he was seeing. She’d joined him on the balcony later but had not embraced him, signaling her displeasure. She’d slammed the bathroom door on him after indicating she was going to throw up, and he should have known better than to walk away. He’d further miscalculated by failing to inquire about her condition when she finally appeared on the balcony. Instead, he pointed to the Aiguille du Midi cable car rising into the darkening sky and reminded her that this trip was his opportunity to make good on a promise: the guided run down the Vallée Blanche that she had not been able to afford when she was younger. It was not until the next morning, her good mood apparently restored, that he had asked how she was feeling. Much better, she’d said. But she hadn’t looked at him. He’d grabbed her shoulders and

turned her towards him, gently tipping her chin up with his finger. *Maybe here is where we can make your other dream come true*, he'd said, hoping for at least a smile. She'd accepted his kiss limply. Had she shared this string of marital discords with the Inspector?

Roger pictures the Inspector, with his practiced look of sympathy, scribbling her story into his notepad.

Gaston adjusts his position in the chair. "I can see you are disenchanted with my personal prying," he says, resting his pen on the notepad. "I must come clean, Monsieur Nettles. I am a big fan of your writing. Not just *The Remaining Few*; I have other of your books as well. I have read them in English, and frankly, I prefer it to my own language. What you can accomplish with words! At first read, you think, *why this cannot be true, he is making all this up, such people do not exist, such landscapes exist only in our imaginations*. But then as the details mount, you are convinced! What cannot possibly be true—must be true. That is an amazing talent."

Roger suppresses the urge to smile at this recognition of his craft. From a local farmer, innkeeper or hotel concierge, Roger might accept such flattery at face value; but from the Inspector, a man with aristocratic bearing uncommon for this part of France, it is a calculated acknowledgement of the ground rules going forward. *I know you*, the Inspector is saying. *I know what you are capable of*.

Gaston flips through several pages of his notepad, settling on a single page, flipping over one more, then returning to the original. "Though you are both accomplished skiers, your wife does not have the mountaineering experience that you possess, correct?" He taps his pen against the notepad.

Roger makes a show of discomfort, shifting from his back to his left side. The Inspector knows the answer to this question, like all the others. Roger groans instead of answering.

“From your book *The Fourteen*,” says the detective, ignoring Roger’s signs of distress. *Fourteen* is shorthand for the fourteen peaks over 8000 meters that constitute the oeuvre of the world’s most elite mountaineers. “I learned you completed the NOLS program in Colorado in record time and have in fact led a few expeditions.”

“That was years ago,” says Roger. “Ten at least.” He downs the cup of orange juice in one long sip.

Gaston flips backwards through his notepad, and begins reading silently from the early pages, flipping forward. He stops and looks up. “Nonetheless, your competence—and your journalistic skills, got you a spot on the aborted American K2 expedition team, during which you had to make a difficult life-and-death choice.”

The Inspector pauses, sensing Roger’s need to clarify. “Yes, I made the decision. I sacrificed a life to save a life,” says Roger.

“In your introduction you said it took you two years to get over the death of the climber to whom you were attached. Two years before you could write about it. I can’t imagine how difficult it must have been for you, and yet—the descriptions took my breath away. Some of the best evocations I have ever read, of the beauty and danger, and passion, of mountain climbing. I am in awe.”

Roger knows why the Inspector has chosen this particular event to focus on. “Then you also know that was the end of mountaineering for me. You must practice those skills on a regular basis, or you will lose them.”

“Nonetheless,” the Inspector says, “Even if your skills have diminished, I doubt your knowledge has. Having observed Gilles Villeneuve during his efforts to rescue you and your wife, and bring you to safety, you have the knowledge to be able to describe accurately what you saw him do.” Though clearly the Inspector is not asking a question, but making a statement, he waits for Roger to respond.

“You want my expert opinion as to the quality of his efforts?” says Roger.

“*Non, non!*, says the Inspector. “Not at all. But you know the terminology, what a belay is, what a piton is for, how an ice axe is supposed to be held, and so on. Don’t water it down for me. Don’t say *the man put a device in the snow*. Tell me, did he make a snow bollard or use a picket? Did he fashion a waist or a shoulder harness? Did he use two carabiners with double ropes, or four carabiners? Or fashion a garda hitch? A single anchor, or two? If two, did he use a clove hitch at the master point? This is how you can be most helpful. I have explained to my *chef* that in this inquiry we are most fortunate to have as our witness a man of your experience and skill.”

Gaston makes a show of closing his notebook and setting it, along with the pen, on the side table next to Roger’s book. He glances back at Cathou, who lifts the iPad from his lap and gives Gaston the thumbs-up sign. “Shall we begin?” he says, settling back into his chair. He lays his hands gracefully across his lap. “I think it best, now that we have the background, you tell your story the same way you would tell it if you were writing one of your books, *n’est-ce pas?* In my notes I have, already, statements from rescue personnel, other mountain guides, the helicopter pilot, and so forth. And your wife, of course. I will ask as few questions as possible, as I prefer not to be at cross-purposes, or to force you accidentally onto a narrative that is not the one you would take naturally.”

“Where should I start?” says Roger, switching from his left side to his right.

“Wherever you like, Monsiuer,” says Gaston, smiling. “This is *your* story.”

Roger understands the challenge now. His story will have to be so compelling, so rich in meticulous and accurate detail, that the Inspector will have no choice but to simply collect the fine and release him—perhaps with an added thank-you for being so cooperative.

3.

Roger realizes he must balance two competing impulses: that of the accident victim, injured in a frightening fall, whose story would be more believable if it came out in a torrent of haphazard recollections; and that of the experienced climber, the expert observer, who would take care to organize his thoughts, take the time to reflect on the accuracy of what he was saying. The Inspector gently nudges the book on the bedside table past the food tray so that the microphone is inches away from the bedrail. He leans towards it and speaks:

“Jeudi, le vingt mars, deux-mille dix-huit. Clinique D’Elancorte, trois heures l’apres midi. C’est Emil Gaston, Inspecteur Principal de Police de la Préfecture à Haute Savoie à l’appareil, avec Roger Nettles, parlant de son propre libre arbiter.”⁶

The Inspector nods at Roger. A small green square on the iPad screen blinks rhythmically. As Roger begins speaking, the screen splits in two, offering Yann a view of the translator app performing its job: on the left, a transcription of Roger’s testimony, on the right a French translation. Yann smiles and sits back, confident that the device will catch every word and inflection of Roger’s story:

⁶ “Thursday, March twentieth, two-thousand-eighteen. The Elancourt Clinic, 3pm. Emile Gaston, Chief Inspector of the Haute-Savoie District, interviewing Roger Nettles, speaking freely.”

—(Recording) *Let me say at the outset, Gilles was very kind. Very courteous. My wife and I were instantly charmed by him. We met him at the téléferique. We immediately offered to take him out to dinner at the end of the day, which he enthusiastically accepted. The travel brochures say this is an essential part of gaining special treatment during the day. But I think he was charmed because Carol spoke French so fluently. She was in the zone, which pleased me because she had been sick the first night and hadn't returned to her normal self until the next day. It didn't help that I'd been less than sensitive and said a few things I wished I could take back, but, true to character, a couple days later she had risen to the occasion. The two of them spoke French all day! Gilles showed us a contour map and traced all the possible routes down the Vallée Blanche. He explained that if we passed his test on ability, we would be treated to an extraordinary day, one rarely offered to tourists. Carol said 'Our lives are in your hands, Gilles' and the two of them were practically glued together all day, talking about God-knows what in French every time we stopped. I don't mind telling you I was jealous of that connection. If only I'd brushed up on my French like she had!*

—*But once we exited the tunnel, once I saw what awaited us—well, all anyone can feel is awe. That hike to the staging area is enough to make you weep! The steep wooden stairwell was covered with ice, and it was followed by a narrow, 200-yard-long ridge of rock and snow, like a frozen waterslide, with steps etched roughly as though by a warped and rusted cross-cut saw blade. A long line of guides and tourists clipped their clients to ropes that paralleled the treacherous, icy path. We participated in the ritual of attaching crampons to boots and testing them. Once at the staging area, Gilles took us off the main glacier immediately, up to the steeper sides. We stayed to the left—close to that 5,000-ft. drop—hiking up, away from the rest of the*

groups that took the standard route towards Italy, which was deeply rutted and moguled—very uninviting.

—Immediately we were in soft snow, blue sky, and bright sun. We took our jackets and hats off. We were in heaven. He was very particular about the order; always himself, Carol, then me. She skied closely behind Gilles, mimicking his style. He had this grace, this economy of movement, the ability to leap effortlessly over obstacles—with a 60-lb. pack on his back! Let me tell you there were times when I thought I was the weakest skier. On windblown and crusty conditions, I broke through the surface, using jump turns that burned my legs, while Gilles and Carol glided over it. We stayed above the glacier itself, above all the other skiers, north along the flank of the Aiguille de Plan, across from the Petit Rognon.

“You know your geography,” interrupts Gaston.

Behind and to one side of Gaston, Yann Cathou clears his throat, but remains motionless, grim-faced, arms still folded tightly against his chest. The Inspector pantomimes the turning of a key with fingers pressed to his lips. Yann frowns.

—The conditions were beautiful. We found light powder on every pitch, after every traverse. Gilles watched Carol and I ski some tough sections, and announced we would finish La Vallée Blanche in half the normal time, and then he’d show us a special route off the Grands Montets in the early afternoon. More challenging and spectacular. We stayed on the northeast-facing slopes until the Refuge de Requin, stopping for a break. The sun was already compressing the snow and Gilles explained that the bridges across the crevasses would soon begin to weaken and collapse. He told us calmly that we had, in that first hour, crossed a half dozen crevasses which a short time later would be impassable.

Roger pauses to take a sip of coffee.

—We still had a number of steep pitches open to us before we reached the Mer de Glace. We were more or less in shadow for the next half hour, but the slopes he found for us, after relatively short traverses, had two feet or so of light powder, and each afforded us twenty to thirty turns. We could see the hordes of skiers picking their way down the middle of the glacier towards the Mer de Glace, struggling past huge icefalls and crevasses that entire buildings could fit in.

Roger pauses again. He applies cream cheese to the bagel the nurse provided and takes several bites. Yann rolls his eyes.

—We straight-ran the second half of the Mer de Glace, and after a short, muddy hike, we caught a bus back to Argentière and Les Grands Montets. It was still before noon! We took the gondola to the top and skirted the backside cliffs to the Couloir Rectiligne and the lower Pas de Chevre. There was no climbing. Some traversing. Some ropes for sidestepping down. We had a snack on the face of the Nant Blanc beneath the Aiguille Vert. Apple and cheese never tasted so good! We were in awe of the grandeur of this view and humbled by the graciousness of Gilles—his guidance and thoughtfulness in taking us there. And then, he said we should go up again, for a third run! Up Les Grands Montets again and down the Lognan Glacier and directly to Argentière. We felt like we had won the lottery!

Cathou taps the Inspector's shoulder and whispers in his ear; it seems a natural stopping point for Roger, and an opportunity for him to query the Inspector.

—Would it be better if I just take us to the next day?

Cathou is still whispering in Gaston's ear, but the detective acknowledges Roger's question with a glance; he raises a finger to suggest this will only take a moment.

“No no!” says Gaston. Cathou angrily leaves the room, slamming his fist into the door jamb as he goes. He leaves the iPad on the chair, where the Inspector can view it. “Monsiuer Cathou had a question he wanted to ask, but I have convinced him to wait.” He waits for a reaction from Roger. When there is none, he continues. “Well then. We are nearly at the pivotal moment. Can you describe for me the run you made Monday afternoon, the bonus run, which was on the same *hors piste* section of the Lognan Glacier as the fatal run on Tuesday?”

—The descent was the easiest of the day, but the most pleasurable. It was also the shortest, but still I lost count of the number of turns we made. It seemed never-ending, much more consistent a gradient than the Vallée Blanche or the Mer de Glace. Longer than the Pas de Chevre. We entered through the first opening in the ropes—down a ways because there was a lot of snow grooming machinery up there—and traversed right towards a large bosse⁷ that jutted up a hundred yards below and well short of the seracs. We changed angles and kept the landmark to our right before the first turn, and then we had maybe a dozen turns before a second, smaller bosse, which we kept to our left. The view of the Argentière glacier opened and we traversed again, all the way to a narrow couloir. We sideslipped—it was quite slick, but Gilles explained that the key was to not fight it, to slip with some speed and trust that the snow quality would improve and slow us down naturally. The best part came right after. Turn after turn, like I said. A hundred, easily. Nonstop. Like a Zen chant. Then a downhill traverse through the trees. No hiking at the end. We took off our skis only a hundred yards from our hotel.

“You said goodbye, thank you, etcetera, etcetera,” says Gaston. “You relaxed a bit, hot tub, shower, and met him for dinner at *La Table*. Very nice.”

—Carol learned about it from her French guidebooks.

⁷ Hump, or mound

“And this is where you gave him, let me see, says the Inspector, consulting his notes. Where you gave him three hundred francs. An unusually large tip!” Cathou stares menacingly at Roger from the doorway.

—*It was an unusually special day, Inspector.*

“Not a bribe for the final run? Or an incentive for another day?”

—*Not by me. But you know already that I left dinner early. I wasn't feeling well.*

“Mal des montagnes,⁸ perhaps? Or too much wine? This can happen even with the most fit athletes.”

—*Too much French, I think. Not for my wife, who is fluent, but when you have to think about every word, speaking in another language is exhausting.*

“Yes, I know,” says Gaston with a wry smile. “When did your wife return to your hotel room?”

—*Honestly, I don't know. I was asleep when she came to bed. But early the next morning she gave me a gentle nudge, said we should sleep in, and that she had planned a surprise for me that afternoon..*

“So it was her idea to retrace your run from the previous day.”

—*Yes.*

“But she said nothing about Gilles. Not right then.”

—*No.*

Gaston lights another cigarette. He waits until there is enough ash to flick off with a pull of his lower lip before continuing.

⁸ “Mountain sickness perhaps?”

“So...here we are,” Gaston pauses, then sighs. “Next day, the day of the accident.”

After a few more draws, Gaston lets the cigarette fall from his lips and crushes it against the linoleum underfoot.

The narrative thread unfolds for Roger like a clearly marked route on a topographic map:

—We got up late, after 10am. Walked around town, looking in shop windows, had coffee and croissants by the river. A little after eleven we took the lift to the top. I thought we would spend the afternoon skiing the front side, like everyone else. There was still a lot of powder, in spite of the crowds that had skied it already. But Carol said she had something else in mind. A treat for me, she said. She took out a map, a detailed elevation map, but with an even higher ratio than the one Gilles had shown us the previous day. I guessed it was maybe one to one hundred thousand. One centimeter equals one kilometer. I’d worked with these kinds of maps on my expeditions. I didn’t ask, but I knew she had to have gotten it from Gilles the night before. A twisting line had been drawn in ink that led down the area Gilles had taken us on the previous afternoon, above the Argentière glacier.

“This was her surprise,” says Gaston. “Her gift to you. Because at dinner she had remarked how the day could not have been any better. And you said—do you remember what you said during dessert?”

—I said, that it could have been better only if it had just been the two of us.

“Indeed,” says Gaston. “Such a lovely sentiment. So romantic. And voila! She produces the topographic map, provided to her by Gilles.”

—Yes. She said the route had been laid out by Gilles the previous evening, after I’d left, almost identical to the one we’d taken with him, the change, she said, Gilles having taken into

account the prediction of overnight warming and winds that signaled an impending storm the following evening. He was confident, she said, that we could handle it by ourselves, and be finished hours before the storm arrived. He had written a lot of notes on the edge of the map. Directions in French. Landmarks. Things to look out for.

“This must have come as quite a surprise. What did you make of it?”

—She seemed even more excited than I. It apparently hadn’t occurred to her—that Gilles was taking a big chance. If anything went wrong, Gilles could lose his license and his job as a guide.

Cathou, who had snuck back into his chair, rose abruptly, clutching at the iPad before it could fall out of his lap. “Vous le saviez—et—et pourtant! Vous auriez du la rejeter!”⁹

Gaston laid an arm across Cathou’s chest. “Never mind Yann. Please go on. I feel we have intruded too much already.”

— We passed through the ropes again, below the group of vehicles. Gilles had marked the first bosse with an x, and we passed below it just like on Monday. I expected to pass the second bosse within a minute, but I couldn’t see it. There were other tracks but they all broke off to go downhill way too soon to fit the line laid out on Gilles’ map. After a while there were just our tracks, and still no bosse. I figured we had just traversed too high and it was hidden below the curve of the slope. We got to a point where we could see the Argentière glacier below. But there was no couloir. A broad arête¹⁰ prevented us from traversing further. Either we would have to descend, or traverse back uphill the way we came in.

“When did you realize that you had not entered through the same opening as the day before? That in fact you had already passed the second bosse, thinking it was the first?”

⁹ “You knew this—and yet! You should have overruled her!”

¹⁰ a sharply vertical rock face

—*Honestly? It never occurred to me. Not until Gilles pointed it out, before he made the extra rappel down to retrieve the ice axe I had dropped.*

Yann drops his head and sighs heavily. Gaston says, “So, as experienced as you were, you made a foolish mistake, failing to notice that more machinery had arrived below the summit, along the ropes. That the rows of groomers and front-loaders now extended several hundred yards further down from the lift summit. That you entered hors-piste much lower than you had with Gilles.”

—*My excuse is that I was thrilled to see my wife in such a good mood. She was so happy. She looked more beautiful than ever. My eyes were on her more than the mountain when we departed the summit. I also felt we could handle the pitch heading to the glacier. I didn't want to spoil her mood. As long as we headed away from the rock wall, we could ski down and we'd eventually cross where we'd descended the day before.*

“La Paroi Rocheuse,” says Yann, spitting the “s” sound and frowning.

“A dead end, as you say in America,” said Gaston.

—*She realized we'd made a mistake and asked me to look at the map. I explained my reasoning for heading away from the rock face instead of descending right alongside it. We had no idea what the pitch might be like below our sight line, as the pitch was becoming more convex as the slope fell away. The snow was luxurious, though, and we were able to ski garlands—left turn, traverse a bit 'til we slowed down, left turn again. After a bit of this I consulted the map again, confident that the bosse would reveal itself eventually. But I did not account for how severely convex the slope was. Looking up, we could no longer see the summit of Les Grands Montets. Only blue sky. Ahead of us there was another rock face looming. It soon became clear that we had only one choice, to descend to the glacier. The snow was perfection, and the ease of*

turning and controlling speed took away some of the nerves. We went in short spurts. Carol led. She felt it was safer. One, because she was more cautious, and two, in case she got into trouble, I'd be able to get to her quickly. After a while she was happy again, whooping and yelling. There was no one near us. Our tracks were the only tracks. Our breathing was the only sound. Across the wide glacier we saw and admired the Aiguille de Chardonnet. We sat together to get our bearings. I felt we were really close to being safe. Maybe four-five hundred feet of vertical left to the glacier floor. The pitch was not severe, the slope straight, holding a great deal of snow. We didn't rush. The air was amazingly clear, the snow was light and glittery. But the slope soon became convex again; we couldn't see where the base met the glacier. The sun had dropped behind the peaks to our west and south, but there were still a couple hours left of daylight. The slope grew abruptly steeper, and I lost sight of Carol. From the map, I had expected the shift in pitch, but the conditions changed, the powder thinned, and underneath was hard ice. I fell on my side and started sliding, spinning on the slick surface. My head faced downhill, pushing up into my eyes the thin layer of fluffy snow that covered the ice. The next thing I remember I was waking up next to Carol. She was scraping snow from my shoulders and head, scooping it out of my parka. I was looking towards the sky. I had no idea how long I had been out. My neck was very stiff, and my arms tingly, like after an electric shock. I looked up past Carol and saw a near-vertical ice wall that curved near the top, and ended abruptly on the flats where we laid. At first, I thought we had tumbled all the way to the glacier, but when I turned my head, what little I could, I realized we were still a hundred feet above it. Carol was afraid she had either twisted her left knee badly or broken her lower leg. She alternated groaning and sighing with each breath. Our skis were gone, but we still had our daypacks. When I got over the shock, the pain in my neck increased when I tried to move it. Carol told me I'd been knocked out and she'd been

shaking me for quite a while. My chest felt tight. I had trouble taking deep breaths. She managed to straighten her injured leg and stopped groaning. First order of business was to stay warm; we swung our arms and clapped our hands together to open the blood vessels. It was difficult for me, but we each had brought six aspirin in our daypacks for the altitude, and we took them all. We ate a couple of chocolate bars. Every few minutes we yelled for help.

Gaston raises his hand. It is still holding the pen. “To be more accurate, your wife called for help.”

—Yes. I tried, but I was useless. I had trouble breathing. I was still woozy from the fall.

“The bruised ribs. Of course. I apologize for the interruption. Please continue.”

—Next thing I know I woke up to Gilles’ voice. He was gently nudging me. I had no idea how much more time had passed. I thought I was dreaming. Such an amazing coincidence that he was our rescuer! He was very calm. He had rappelled down. I could not see Carol. I was in a panic. But he assured me that she was okay. He had already pulled her up to safety, and he was going to do the same for me. Snow was beginning to fall. Clouds had accumulated and were descending rapidly. I could no longer see the tops of the needles. Gilles rolled me over and fastened a harness around my waist. He asked if I could use my arms to sit up, and despite the tingling I said yes. He slipped the lower harness up each leg and around my hips and secured it. He gave me an ice axe and fastened crampons to my feet. He looped a section of rope through a carabiner and knotted it off. He explained that I was heavy and would have to help myself some on the way up. Then he helped me to stand and lean against the ice wall. He explained what was going to happen as he attached the ropes to me. He asked me to squeeze the handle of the ice axe and then tried to pull it from my grasp, to test my strength. I was to use the crampons and the ice

axe, he explained, and to stay upright, toes into the ice as I ascended. He would go up first, and once in position, he would give the ropes a tug to let me know he was ready.

Cathou taps Gaston on the shoulder and whispers something in French. “Ah, yes,” says Gaston. “The observational eye for which you are so famous is desperately needed now, Monsieur Nettles. How Gilles set up his anchors for the rappel and the belay. And which was primary. Which was secondary. The ropes used. The loops and knots. Which kinds of carabiners. Did he use a garda hitch or a clove hitch at the master point. All we know is that when the helicopter arrived, it was as if all these items never existed. Everything had failed and tumbled down to the glacier along with Gilles. How could this have happened? You must tell us everything.”

Roger looks into the eyes of the detective. This is the crucial moment. The emotional tone must be pitch perfect.

—It started when I dropped the ice axe. When my grip failed. I hadn’t tightened the loop around my wrist. If I hadn’t dropped it, none of this—”

“No, no no, Monsieur Nettles. From where you left off. Please.”

—As soon as I felt the rope tighten, with my right hand gripping the ice axe, and my left around the rope where it attached to my harness, I began the one-two-three: ice axe, left foot, right foot. Wait. Repeat. It took about ten of these until the pitch reduced out enough for me to see him. He was positioned well above Carol. He was standing in a kind of pit, and behind him he’d created a huge snow bollard, maybe three meters diameter. To his left, a secondary anchor, using a picket, I think, but what length I couldn’t tell. It was well inserted, and I could only see a bit of black metal protruding. The master point was a few feet below him, and the two strands of rope formed a Y. After each pull, he’d take up the slack to his left, so I assumed he had a garda

hitch attached to the rope bringing me up. It all looked very standard. As the slope flattened, I stood up, and he yelled at me to stay low, so I got back down on my knees. Then I remembered that with a snow bollard the rope must stay close to, or on the snow, as it exits the arc. He waved one hand up and down, signaling he wanted me even lower. That's when I made the mistake.

“What mistake was that?”

—I stopped using the ice axe, because it was too hard to hold with my body next to the surface. But when I let go of the handle, I realized that the loop had come off my wrist, and the axe just fell, sliding down and out of view. I apologized, but Gilles just kept motioning for me to keep going, past Carol, and to stop just below him. With my body on the snow next to his feet, he turned me over and unfastened the rope and unraveled the garda hitch. I tried to sit up, but felt woozy from the effort, and had to lie down on my side, facing him. I could see what he'd done. How he'd fashioned the snow bollard, usually used for an abseil, for the rescue. He must not have been carrying a picket, because I could see now that he'd used another ice axe as the second anchor. I knew why he wanted two anchors. I weigh over 200 pounds. I could see a gap forming in the snow above the ice axe anchor, indicating it had been under a lot of stress getting me up. As he unhooked me from the ropes, I kept apologizing about the ice axe. He announced he would descend and look for it. I couldn't believe he would put himself at risk again—for an ice axe. But he refused to let it go, he said, because it had belonged to his father. He assured me that it would only take a few minutes at most and he'd be back up, with or without it. He then re-fastened his rope, fashioning another garda hitch to the master point, and began his descent. After he disappeared from view, you could hear the ropes sliding through his harness, and his crampons, each time they chipped into the ice. After a few minutes, the rope went taut again, indicating he was on his way up. I was right next to the anchor when it started to dislodge. A

series of jerks loosened it a third of the way, and I called down to him. I tried to push it back down but the tension on the rope was too great. 'Merde' I heard him yell, just as the ice axe dislodged completely. It flew by me, the wire attached to it snapping like a whip, and it, too, came loose and flew down the slope and out of sight. The master point swung away from me slightly, aligning directly under the snow bollard, which held, thank God. Gilles called up and instructed me to slide over to the pit where he had been, and to run the rope through the carabiners on my harness using a double loop, and a bowline to secure it. I was to sit and stay low, my crampons pressed into the front ledge of the pit and use my body weight as extra security. As I crawled over towards the master point I watched, in horror, as the snow began giving way around the edges of the bollard, where the rope emerged. I fumbled with the section of looped rope now dangling downslope of the master point and tried to follow his instructions. There was only one caribiner attached to the front of my harness, and I couldn't locate another one. Maybe one will be enough, I hoped, but before I could even get the rope through the caribiner, I felt the main rope slip and when I looked back uphill, more of the snow bollard had given way. I could see the rope inching its way towards the apex of the semi-circle. I walked up to the curve and began stepping on the edge, trying to compress the snow, make it denser, so the rope would be more secure. I figured Gilles had not found his father's ice axe, because if he had, he would not have needed the rope. He kept crying out 'Merde' over and over again, just as he came into view. I think he could sense that the bollard was failing, and when I turned around, he sped up. But to climb more rapidly, he had to stand. He held the rope as low as he could, and when he got to where the slope was not so steep, maybe an intermediate pitch for skiers, he was practically lunging, still grabbing the rope, and cursing, with every step. Carol was sitting up by then, her eyes fixed on him. She asked me what the hell was happening, and I said that the

anchor was failing. ‘Can’t you help him?’ she asked me. This whole time I had been trying to get the second caribiner, but with each jerk on the rope, I lost control of the loop and had to start over. I was amazed that a man who weighed barely 140 lbs. could create such stress on the rope. He had not cleared the ice when he saw Carol. She called out to him. He was smiling. ‘Ça y est!’¹¹ he said, and Carol shouted back ‘Ça y est!’ He stood for a while. Catching his breath I suppose. I thought everything was going to be OK, that the real danger had passed. I could see that he had fastened one of those ascenders, a Petzl, maybe, to the rope. He slid the ascender up a few feet and took a step. I did not even see the rope stretch tight. I did not feel the pull against the loop I was still trying to fasten to the master point. But as soon as his arm bent, the snow bollard gave way and flew into the back of my legs, sending me flying. I saw Gilles arm, the one that had been holding the ascender, rise into the air as he fell backwards and started sliding on the ice. I scrambled to my feet but it was too late. The ropes, the ice axe attached to the wire, the masterpoint itself—all slid down the ice and out of sight following Gilles. Carol looked up at me in astonishment. I think she was waiting for a sound, something. We heard nothing. She turned and looked down at the empty slope. No ropes, no ice axe, no Gilles. ‘What just happened?’ she asked me. And really, I think it was less than a minute later the helicopter arrived, and two men landed on the slope above us along with a stretcher. It was snowing harder—or else it was the helicopter wash. Carol told the men ‘Il est tombé! Il is tombé!’¹² and pointed down the precipice. The next thing I knew I was being loaded onto the helicopter.

Roger glances past Gaston towards where Yann Cathou had been sitting—he has snuck out of the room again.

—And then, I woke up here.

¹¹ “All good!”

¹² “He’s fallen! He’s fallen!”

4.

The Inspector taps the iPad Yann had left on the chair seat and stops the recording, just as Yann rounds the corner, pushing a woman in a wheelchair. He stops in the doorway. Carol sits motionless, her left leg extended straight forward, enveloped in a thick cast from knee to toes. With her face bathed in daylight, she looks as steely eyed as the mountain guide, who stands, stiff as an iron beam, behind her.

Gaston gestures for Carol to come closer. She wheels herself slowly to the center of the room and stops. "Your wife, as you requested," says Gaston, smiling at Roger. It is the smile of a poker player raising a bet, without taking a card himself.

"How are you, honey?" asks Roger.

"I'm here," she says coolly, a phrase that could mean *I'm here for you*. But also, *I don't want to be here*. She keeps her distance.

"First thing I did, when I came to, was ask for you."

"Second thing, if we are being honest" says Gaston, who remains at an oblique angle, between the couple. "He wanted first to know where he was. Then he fell asleep again. *Then* he asked about you."

Carol does not smile or frown. Roger breaks the stretch of silence: "They told me about the broken leg and ankle, but since you hadn't come to see me, I thought maybe it was much worse than broken bones. You know how doctors are not the best at giving bad news."

The Inspector says to Carol, "You have come here to tell him?"

“Tell me what?” asks Roger, his voice cracking. The sense of dread that had squeezed his chest, creating the all-consuming anxiety between his fitful bouts of sleep the last two drug-filled days—returns like an echo. He grabs his shackled right hand. “I mean—” he rattles the handcuffs against the rail “—look at this! Can you believe this shit?”

“Frankly I don’t care,” she says, her features softening a little, her eyes moist and red. “You say you were worried it could have been worse for me than a broken leg? Well, it is worse, Roger. Much worse.”

Roger reaches out with his free arm, hoping she will respond and come to him. “What do you mean?”

She rolls the wheelchair back slightly. “I was pregnant, Roger,” she says harshly. “I was pregnant. And now—I’m not.”

Roger is at first stunned by the bluntness of his wife’s revelation, then reflects on the implication: *That time at Snow Summit. Two months ago.* Gaston smiles, which annoys Roger, who remembers the smug detective’s “prying” early on. *I’m such an idiot.* He extends his free arm again towards Carol, who retreats. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” he says. His eyes moisten, prelude to tears, because he is truly sorry for her loss.

“You didn’t know she was pregnant?” says Gaston. “You are surprised?”

Carol purses her lips, inhales through her nose, and exhales heavily. She states bitterly, with finality, “No. He’s not surprised.” She looks at Gaston. “He’s relieved. He didn’t lose anything.” The wheelchair spins 180 degrees, and she rolls out of the room.

“Yann,” says Gaston. “Can you see to it that Mrs. Nettles gets to her hotel?” The guide dutifully nods and follows Carol down the hallway, out of view. The Inspector stands patiently at the foot of Roger’s bed.

“So, in reality,” he announces, “We have *two* deaths. Not just one. *Quel dommage*, eh?”¹³ Dr. Petit enters with a nurse and announces that Roger should do a walk-around before they OK his release. “Perhaps, Roger,” Gaston adds, “We can talk and walk *au meme temps*?”¹⁴ He removes the handcuffs from Roger’s wrist, and hooks them to his belt. He gestures for Yann, who has returned to the doorway, to remove the iPad and microphone from the room.

Roger dresses in the t-shirt and lightweight running togs that had served as his base layer for skiing when he was brought in. He feels a little pressure in his upper spine when standing, but it eases when he walks. The nurse obliges Gaston’s request and allows the two men to walk side-by-side ahead of her. She is holding a bottle of water. Gaston leads them outside and around the gardens in the courtyard of the Clinic d’Élancourte. The clouds from earlier have dissipated. The sun is shining.

“*Il fait beau, n’est-ce pas?*”¹⁵ the nurse remarks, as first Mont Blanc, then the Aiguille de Midi, come into view over the flank of Brevent.

“I have been thinking, Roger,” says Gaston. “That everyone is a storyteller in some way or another. They say human beings are unique because we think, and make plans, and create tools and such. But I think we are unique because we tell stories, day in and day out. It is what glues us together, really. Shared stories of this and that, building a foundation for all of us to trust one another. I go to the *supermarché* because my wife has told me a little story about what we need for dinner. I tell my daughter a little story about laces and eyelets, and over and under, and loops and bows, and she learns how to tie her shoes. These are simple stories, granted. Some stories are repeated over and over, relearned and passed down generation to generation.

¹³ “What a pity, eh?”

¹⁴ “at the same time.”

¹⁵ “Nice day, don’t you think?”

Some stories are told by *voleurs*¹⁶ who want to avoid prison. Instructions on how to build a dresser—a story, *n'est-ce pas*? But clearly some of us are better than others at telling stories. You tell a very good story, and that is a rare talent. Your work sells, your readers love you because you do not just record what you see. You pick and choose, according to what has affected you the most. By sharing that which is most personal to you, you reach a broad audience. To some degree your art is the art of choosing well, I think. Editing, you might say. What to put in. What to leave out.”

“Everyone edits their stories, Inspector,” says Roger, unsurprised at Gaston’s acute analysis: typical French intellectual, analyzing anything and everything to death! “Most of us do it unconsciously, out of necessity, because our minds are cluttered with information. When there is purpose to a story, people tailor it to their needs.”

“Exactly!” says Gaston energetically. He shakes his limbs, as if preparing for a run. He places a hand on Roger’s shoulder, suggesting they stop walking. “Right now, for example, you and I are both observing this magnificent view of Mont Blanc. We have seen it before—myself, many times—but if I want someone who has *not* seen it to get the feeling of majesty, of infinite possibilities, of the urge to climb or to ski it, to rise above the day-to-day—I would tell one story. If, on the other hand, I want you to feel the danger, the risk, the intensity and desire required to summit, I would tell quite another. I must reflect a bit, eh? On what story it is I must tell.”

“You have the soul of a writer, then,” says Roger.

Gaston stuffs his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels. “When we were first contacted about your arrival at the Clinic, and the accident, I knew it had to be me to take your statement.”

¹⁶ thieves

“Because you knew about my writing?”

“Partly, but mostly because you and I have talents that complement one another. You have perfected the art of storytelling. I have —well, perfected may be overstating my abilities, but I have, shall we say—learned how to listen very well. The stories I listen to every day—how a teenager robbed a store; how a man caused an automobile accident while texting; how exactly did the bank discover the fraud—they are so poorly told. Too little detail, too much detail. I listen. I am sensitive to their purpose. They are all self-serving. So, in the end, I must rewrite their stories. And when I do this, my stories put an end to each of theirs. I write the *dernier histoire*,¹⁷ you could say, which is what I give to the prosecutors.”

“The difference,” says Roger, glancing sideways at Gaston, then back at the majestic peaks in the distance, “is that yours is a moral aesthetic. Mine is artistic.” To the west, the sky is a clear blue, the kind of dense, dark blue that signals dry air high up in the atmosphere. To the east, the wisps of clouds circling Mont Blanc hint at an incoming storm. Roger closes his eyes and pictures his wife on her way to their hotel in the little village of Argentière that stands watch at the opposite end of the valley. He opens his eyes. “I sense you have a *dernier histoire* for me.”

Gaston separates from Roger. “A rewrite, if you will. I admit to the famous French hubris: that we are superior in everything!” He chuckles, mouth closed. “Despite all evidence to the contrary!” he adds, bursting into laughter. “To think I could do a rewrite of a Roger Nettles story!” He turns around and sees that Roger is not laughing with him. Not even smiling. He stifles his laugh and returns to where Roger had stopped. He glances at the nurse behind Roger. She appears to have been amused by his remarks. “So. Do you want to hear it?”

Suddenly it is *all* Roger wants. “Do I have a choice?” he says, mockingly.

¹⁷ last story

“It’s a compelling story,” says Gaston. “And like yours, full of details and quite convincing. In the end, even you may believe my story to be more convincing than yours.”

Feeling fatigued, Roger asks the nurse if there is a place to sit; she escorts the two men to a bench facing a row of sunflowers. They sit and Gaston waves her off. She hands Roger the bottled water and retreats a few paces.

“In a short while, you will get on a plane and return to America,” the Inspector begins. “There is a remote possibility you will reconcile with your wife, but I doubt it. In France, we are sensitive to these kinds of things. I do not think you have it in you to create a story that will win her back, because she knows you are more concerned about losing her than about the loss of the baby.”

“What do you mean—losing her?”

The Inspector lights a cigarette and draws on it slowly, until there is enough ash to flick when he holds it between his fingers. The nurse frowns and steps further away, to avoid the smoke. Roger’s eyes are on Mont Blanc in the distance. Gaston’s gaze shifts there as well, and stays on it as he speaks:

“If I accept your story about the accident, which is compelling, to be sure, then tomorrow the valley residents will unhappily accept that Gilles Villeneuve’s death was an accident of his own cause, a mixture of poor judgment, poor execution in the establishment of the anchors, and bad timing—that rare intersection of many variables. That is what accidents are, after all. To find fault—to place blame elsewhere, as Yann has urged me to do—would require a different story, supplied either by your wife or by the evidence gathered from the scene. But your wife is unreliable, as she did not witness the critical moments, and the forensics are unlikely,

given the snow that blanketed the site after your evacuation, and the temperature fluctuations that have degraded the snowpack.”

“Nonetheless,” says Roger. He keeps his eyes on Mont Blanc.

“Yes. There is a nonetheless.” The inspector takes his eyes off the distant peaks and looks at Roger. “Just as you do not easily accept that your wife has decided to leave you, I do not easily accept your story.” He takes out his notepad. “As you have been telling your story, I have been listening—and writing my own, based on all the stories I have listened to so far. For example.” He swings the notepad to the right. “She loves me.” He swings it to the left. “She loves me not.” He slaps the notepad against his thigh. “They cannot both be true.”

Roger takes a long sip of water.

“To be fair,” says Gaston, “I accept that you did not *plan* this disaster. And that day one with Gilles was as you described it. Once-in-a-lifetime. Except—”

“Except,” Roger interrupts again, smiling. “Except I downplayed my abilities.”

“Yes,” says Gaston. “Normally an admirable, and most un-American, trait: humility.” He leans forward and tilts his head at an angle, as if he were trying to get a view of the front of Roger’s face, then tilts back. “If anyone understands false humility, it’s the French, eh? We are expert at snobbery and so we are well-prepared to deal with it in others. It’s possible you broke through the crust on day one, for example, and it makes for a good story. But you did *not* fall—or fall behind—because of poor technique. You lagged behind on purpose, so you could watch—discreetly, from a distance—how your wife behaved with Gilles, without appearing to be spying on them. There was no wind that day, so sound traveled uphill easily, and you understand French better than you let on. Hiding your fluency is a tactic you have used often. In *The Remaining Few*, for example, in which you feigned ignorance of the Basque dialect to entice

the locals to lower their guard, to speak more frankly than they might otherwise. It is how you found the hidden-away *jatetxea*¹⁸ in Anlesti.”

Roger feels the muscles in his lower back tense; he makes a show of crossing his right leg over his left to relieve the tightness and accompanies it with a strained sigh.

“But I digress,” says the Inspector. “It’s speaking English, is my excuse. I tend to get lost in *la soupless*¹⁹ of the English vocabulary.” He clears his throat. “On the ledge, according to your wife, once the initial effects of the concussion had worn off, you expressed your guilt to your wife, for having mismanaged the hors-piste descent. You also—” Gaston flipped back several pages and squinted, leaning towards his notepad, as if what he was reading were in much smaller script. “Ah, here it is. You told her you were prepared now to be a father. She says here that you were in tears. You were crying.”

Roger continues staring at the mountains in the distance. Both the Aiguille Rouge and the Dru pierce the light wisps of clouds, the clouds forming above Mont Blanc have thickened.

The Inspector looks up from his notepad. “Do you remember what she said in response?”

Roger’s eyes remained fixed on the mountains. “I don’t think she said anything.”

“Oh, but she did.” Gaston places a finger on the notepad. “She said, I wrote it down here: *How convenient it was for you now.*” He looks at Roger. “*How convenient!* What a thing for her to say!”

Roger finally turns his head towards Gaston. “If in fact she said it. She’s angry with me. She’s found a way to hurt me. And you believe her.”

“Well, it’s my job to decide who and what to believe.”

¹⁸ restaurant (Basque)

¹⁹ “it’s flexibility.”

“Yes, I know. My story or hers. They can’t both be true, right?” Roger understands the Inspector’s tactical maneuver: if he can get me to admit to lying about something peripheral to the real focus of his investigation—Gilles’ death—the peeling away of that small piece will lead to a fracture point—a crack, a fissure as in a weakening snow layer—causing a larger chunk to fall away. A sluff of guilt—to advance the metaphor—before the avalanche of confession. He has the town’s expectations, personified by the guide Yann Cathou, weighing on him. Against it, I have only my conscience.

“And then she called out Gilles name. Screamed it in fact,” says Gaston. “However, this is not what you said in your story earlier. You said: *She cried out for help*. That you were too weak, your neck and rib injuries too painful, for you to cry out as well. You did not say: *She called out Gilles name*.”

“I don’t remember,” says Roger. “Honestly. I was having trouble concentrating.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” says Gaston. “The effects of the concussion. Fortunately for you, Doctor Petit has already testified that your concussion—though not severe—could have caused you to black out for a short period. He cannot rule out that your memory may have been affected.”

Roger lowers his head into his waiting hands, and rubs his forehead, palms together, sliding his hands apart and alongside his temples, clasping his fingers together just above the back of his neck. “That’s all I’m saying, Inspector. I’m doing the best I can.”

Noticing Roger’s head drop, the nurse calls out, “Mr. Nettles, are you feeling all right? Do you need to return inside?” She approaches the bench, but Gaston holds his arm out and she stops.

“We’ll only be a few more minutes, nurse,” he says. “I assure you I’ll watch Mr. Nettles closely and call you if necessary. *Il se sent juste emotif.*”²⁰

Roger looks up at the nurse, who is holding her position behind Gaston. “*Je vais bien. Ça va.*”²¹ he says, smiling weakly.

The Inspector leans towards Roger. “It was *Gilles*’ name that echoed across the glacier, was it not?” His face is uncomfortably close to Roger’s. “Filling the space above you, and across to the Aiguille de Chardonnet. And certainly, an adventurer such as yourself, with your experience, knows that the sound would have carried upwards—but not all the way to the pistes of Les Grandes Montets on the other side of the ridge line. You would have been thinking: how slim the chances were that a guide leading a group hors-piste would have been skiing close enough for your wife’s cries to have been heard. You would have been thinking that you wouldn’t survive the night if the weather turned. And the weather was turning. A snow squall was coming.” Gaston raised his voice abruptly, enough to cause the nurse to take a nervous step back. “This is the moment she told you the part of her plan she had left out earlier, *n’est-ce pas?* How she hired Gilles to keep an eye on the two of you— without you knowing—so you could have the experience she knew you craved, that you had spoken of at dinner the night before! *Hors piste*, just the two of you! At the end of the day, when you were exhausted and grateful for *her* gift, she was going to tell you that she was pregnant. A perfect day, indeed. For both of you. But she was afraid that because of the mistake you had made up top, he hadn’t seen you enter the area beyond the ropes. That he wouldn’t be able to find you.”

Gaston backs off. It is his turn to stare at the mountains, though now the sky has completely clouded over. There’s a chill in the air, and all the peaks are cloud-covered.

²⁰ “He is just feeling emotional.”

²¹ “I’m fine. It’s OK.”

“Can we go back inside?” asks Roger. He stands up, unsteadily, and the nurse reaches out to him, pre-empting Gaston’s effort to do the same. She holds one of Roger’s elbows and leads him thru the entrance to the clinic. Gaston pockets the notepad and follows.

“Five hundred more euros,” says the Inspector, sliding past the nurse and opening the door. “That’s what it cost her to have Gilles keep an eye on the two of you.” He falls behind them again as they walk slowly down the hallway. “She knows you, your wife. Even before you mentioned it at dinner, she knew you wanted to go hors piste again, but without a guide. When she returned from the restaurant, you appeared to be asleep. But you were not asleep. You had waited for her, hoping— after such a wonderful day—she would be eager to make love, beneath the majestic peaks of the Mont Blanc Massif. What could be more erotic? She is young. Beautiful. Sensual. Athletic. Everything a man could want. And after such an unforgettable experience in the mountains? Of course, she would give herself to you. So, you waited up, your desire for her building. But when the hours passed and she did not return, your mood soured. Midnight. 1 am. 2 am.” Gaston interrupts himself, flips through several pages of the notepad, and settles on one. He catches up to Roger. “It was after 3am when she returned. Your mind was racing. The alcohol, the wine. The circumstances conspired to unnerve you. Had she spent five hours just talking? Gilles was attractive. *Charmant. Masculin. Viril.*²²

“So, you feigned sleep and tortured yourself with visions of your wife—full of the energy and passion that she had been keeping from you for months—with Gilles. Your jealousy had hours to percolate. And even when she produced the map that Gilles had spent most of the evening creating, it did not occur to you that it had to have taken considerable time for Gilles to make it, and to be convinced to follow you the next day—about which you were still ignorant.”

²² Charming. Masculine. Virile.

The nurse leads Roger into his room and back into the bed, which he refuses. Instead, he takes the chair Yann Cathou had used earlier and positions it in front of the large window, giving him the same view they had enjoyed while sitting outside. She provides Roger an extra pillow to support his back and another for his neck. When she finishes adjusting it, she stands back; she hesitates, looking at Gaston, then back at Roger, before leaving.

“Merci,” says Roger as she reaches the door. She does not look back or acknowledge his thank you.

Gaston sits in the chair he had used before the walk. “This is what took your wife so long. To make the route, and to give her the map, to agree to follow you, to break the rules—that took some convincing.” Cathou appears in the doorway. “The five hundred euros, plus the three hundred, plus the guide fee, all found their way into his bank account the next morning, this we know. And had your *hors piste* day with your wife gone well, you might never have known her plan. She could not tell you in advance; that would have spoiled the surprise. Had you not made the fatal mistake of failing to observe the new positioning of the mountain vehicles, and the rope openings to the Glacier Lognan, you would have had your perfect day, and she hers, once you had returned to the hotel.”

“I’ll admit it. I was angry about how late she was, that she just fell asleep,” says Roger. “But I assure you, Inspector, by the time we got on the cable car to head up the Grandes Montets, I had let those feelings go.”

Gaston flips a page over in his notepad. “But not a word between you the entire ride up, so your wife says. Her silence did not seem suspicious to you?”

“She was looking out at the mountains. The sky was impossibly blue. I figured she felt the same awe as I did. I was sure of it.”

Gaston looks at his notepad as he continues, “You never considered that she might have been waiting? Waiting for you to express some curiosity about her physical state? The morning sickness before the trip, and then at the hotel that first night? Some remark on her sudden euphoria, before you first met Gilles, which surprised even her? You never asked—so she assumed you didn’t notice. She did what so many women—who are married to strong-willed, successful men—do: she subordinated *her* quest for happiness to *yours*, and decided to wait until the successful conclusion of the day to tell you she was pregnant. She was hopeful that with the hors piste run behind you, you would embrace your new role as father-to-be.”

Gaston believes he has hit a nerve and is emboldened. “But back to the ledge. The two of you injured and in pain. She tended to you and told you not to worry, that Gilles would be along soon. Your reaction, she told me, was to laugh, and ask her if she had hit her head too.” Gaston closes the little notepad and sits down next to Roger. “But after a half hour, with your stiff neck, your head throbbing and your arms tingling, and Carol’s leg swelling, she began to panic. Gilles had not yet arrived, and that is when she began shouting his name. The jealous feelings you said you had relinquished before the run returned, did they not?” He gives Roger time to respond. Roger says nothing, surmising that to interject now would confirm the Inspector’s characterization of Roger as *the jealous husband*.

“She shouted his name over and over again. You grasped her arm—too tightly she says—and voiced your suspicions. She told you, finally, that her surprise gift to you had included Gilles—paid in advance to keep close, but out of view. She hadn’t told you because she didn’t want to spoil the experience for you. But now, what did it matter? He would be along soon enough. He would have a rescue plan.” The Inspector leafs backwards through his notepad and

reads aloud when he finds the page he was looking for. “Do you remember your reaction when she explained her agreement with Gilles to you.?”

Roger says, “Something like we would have to pay him a lot more money for this.”

“Not exactly,” says Gaston. He brings the notebook closer to his face. “According to your wife, you said, ‘I wonder what he’s going to charge us for *this!*’ which has a different tone, a different meaning entirely, don’t you think?”

“I was trying to be funny,” says Roger. True, possibly. But the Inspector will most certainly see it as self-serving.

“More than likely,” Gaston continues. “At that very moment he was only a few hundred meters above you, working out how to get past the black ice that had been your undoing, and to set up his rescue. He would have seen your tracks leading to the icy section a hundred meters above you, but then he lost the tracks when the snow layer thinned, and he was unsure of where to descend safely. He would have traversed left and right. If he was off even a few meters when he descended it would be problematic. Finally, he heard your wife call his name. He feared your injuries might be severe, so he did not wait to put a plan together. He picked a spot and secured himself, lowering a rope and calling out her name. In your story, at this point, you had lapsed into unconsciousness again, so you were unaware of all this activity.”

“I suppose you will look at your notepad again.”

Gaston smiles. “You are being cynical. Do you know where my story is headed?”

Roger smiles. “No. Only that you have written it down.”

“Now *you* are being disingenuous,” says Gaston. “You must have known ahead of time the story your wife would tell, and the story Gilles would have told, had he survived.” He opens his notepad, sifts through a few pages, but then closes it. “Your marriage, weakened under the

pressure of your conflicting hopes—she for a family, and you for more time as a couple—had collapsed under the weighty mixture of jealousy and guilt. There’s an old saying I’m sure you know: *There are no new stories. Only new tellers.*” Gaston inserts the notepad into the breast pocket of his shirt. He stands up and lights another cigarette, pacing back and forth as he inhales the smoke deeply. He does this several times, then drops the half-finished cigarette to the floor and steps on it. He rests his hands on the back of Roger’s chair. “Your imagination, and the attention to detail it fosters, has served your career well, but it has undone your relationship.” Cathou returns from his errand to escort Roger’s wife to the hotel, and positions himself in the doorframe, smiling. “You imagine—even now—that she had fallen for Gilles that night. That she had kissed him, affected by the wine, or the altitude, or from the sudden immersion back into *la vie française*. Given the hours they were together, you imagined they made love, because she had denied you later. You imagined she had fallen for him the way she had fallen for you when you were still married to your first wife. Gilles was ten years younger than you. Handsome. Sexy. She is a beautiful woman. His arrival on the ledge—though a shock—was proof to you that you were not delusional. Even as he was preparing to lift you to safety, at great risk to himself, you considered your jealousy to be warranted.”

“A wonderfully constructed fiction,” says Roger.

The Inspector is undeterred. “Gilles *est arrivé* and he created the bollard and the secondary anchor, prepared the harnesses. While you were unconscious, or pretending to be, he rescued your wife. What you do not know, what you could not have known at that point, is that he had analyzed the situation—the injuries to your wife, and to you, and had decided that although he could bring you both to safety, he could not get you off the mountain. So he did the noble thing, risking a sanction—or worse. He called his base. Thus putting into motion the

considerable machinery of our professional rescue operations. Gilles attended to your wife, ensuring her pain was minimalized, and that she was safely positioned above. Time for your jealousy to fester further. He established contact with his base and then with the helicopter crew, to describe his predicament, to give them the coordinates they needed, to explain why he needed to act before they arrived. Back on the ledge, as he tended to your injuries, you asked him if he was attracted to your wife. He said, *Bien sur, monsieur*, because who would not be? And he laughed. He thought this drew the two of you closer. His was an innocent laugh; to you it was the cynical laugh of a Frenchman having *une petite aventure*.”²³ Hearing this, Yann steps closer and stands behind Gaston, peering over his shoulder.

“You could not possibly know what we talked about, or if we talked about anything,” says Roger. He is confident now that the Inspector has used his imagination to fill in the gaps, rather than Carol’s actual testimony. He has provided *too many details*, the kind the Inspector himself had said was a telling sign a suspect was lying. Or guilty.

“Ah, but I do,” says Gaston. There is a recording. I do not have it here, but it is between Gilles’ and the helicopter crew, contact that was made after Gilles descended, looking for his father’s ice axe. I will have to paraphrase, but since these were the last known words spoken by Gilles Villeneuve, they have already been shared among the guide community.”

Cathou lurches forward, pressing into Gaston’s back. “Je t’emmerde! On le sait!”²⁴ he blurts out.

Gaston stands up abruptly, forcing the bulky and heavier Cathou to stumble backwards. “Ce n’est pas le moment!”²⁵ Cathou retreats, his eyes cemented to Roger as he repositions

²³ An extramarital fling

²⁴ “Fuck you! We know!”

²⁵ “It’s not the right time!”

himself at the doorway. Gaston sighs and steps towards the window.

“The pilot,” says Gaston. “Asked if everyone was safe and secure. Gilles responded yes.” He mimes the checking of a box in the space in front of the window. “The pilot asked if they were ready to be lifted and Gilles said yes.” Check. “He then asked if Gilles was in position to assist in the lift or load, in case the landing area was not stable. Gilles reassured the pilot that there was sufficient space and the slope angle was conducive to landing.” Check. “The pilot, out of friendship, asked Gilles what possessed him to risk a sanction. Gilles responded by saying something very flattering about your wife. To which the pilot responded *What about the husband?* And Gilles said *The husband acts jealous! He thinks I slept with her!* And the two of them had a good laugh. What gave him that idea, I wonder?” Gaston returns to his chair. “You look pale, Monsieur Nettles. Perhaps the doctor has been too optimistic.”

Roger is looking at Cathou, whose aura of menace is diminished only marginally by the distance that separates them.

When it appears Roger is not going to speak, Gaston continues. “So, back to the moment of your rescue. Gilles fastened your crampons. Fitted the harness. Gave you some pills for the pain. He gave you the ice axe, just like you said, and went up to prepare the ropes for the haul. And yet, you fantasized that he might abandon you.”

“You’re reaching, now,” says Roger.

The Inspector is undeterred. “You told yourself that was a crazy thought. You were in pain, I give you that. You were not—what is the phrase?—*thinking straight*. It wasn’t even the mirage of adultery that drove those thoughts. It was the joy your wife had expressed with him, seeing her so alive, so animated the previous day, and at dinner—with him, and not you! And then, suddenly, Gilles was bringing you up. You felt foolish for having had such thoughts.”

“If I even had them,” says Roger. He says this calmly, knowing that an emotional response will play into Gaston’s narrative.

“You did your part with the crampons, with the ice axe Gilles had given you, walking up the ice wall. Given your injuries, amazing! The will to survive trumps all, eh? But when you finally saw your wife, her attention was directed uphill at Gilles, not downhill at you. You did not see a savior, groaning under the strain of lifting you; you saw a rival for your wife’s affections.”

“You’re right,” says Roger.

“I am?” says Gaston, surprised. Yann, too, changes expression, from furrowed to raised eyebrows.

“It’s a better story than mine. Mine is dull in comparison.”

Gaston sighs. “Well, I have not gotten to the best part,” he says. Cathou looks confused. “You were finally reunited. You hugged your wife. But, having been administered a large dose of painkiller by Gilles, she was woozy, withdrew quickly, and lay back down. You took this as further affirmation of your suspicions. Gilles asked you where was the ice axe, and you pointed back down the precipice. You apologized, overmuch. Gilles said it would only take a moment, that it was his father’s, and he wanted to retrieve it. He did not want to have to pay for a new one, which he would have had to do since he was off the books. And the helicopter was close.” Gaston’s voice lowers and softens. “In fact, you could hear it, couldn’t you? You knew you had to act quickly. Instinct kicked in. The instinct of a man who made a life-and death decision on K2—to save one life at the expense of another—re-surfaced.”

Roger understands the Inspector’s thinking now. The reading. The research. The flattery. “Sharing my remaining oxygen with him,” says Roger, referring to the K2 expedition,

“Meant I would have had to stay with him, and we’d both have died of exposure when the winds kicked in. An entirely different situation. The expedition leader agreed, I did what had to be done.”

“To save one life.”

“Yes.” Roger feels the nausea welling up. There is nothing he can do to quell it. He can only mask it with a stoic expression.

“Your own,” says Gaston.

Roger looks out the window. Gaston stands beside him, hands in his pants pockets. The two men stare straight ahead. Roger imagines that Gaston expects him to collapse, to change his story, to make it conform to the Inspector’s. If so, Gaston’s expression betrays no such hope.

Roger is startled when Gaston resumes speaking. “And so, when you assumed the position Gilles knew would be necessary in case an anchor failed, your wife assumed you intended to help. She was well below you but could see you had moved below the bollard. She lay down, sure that all was going to be well now. But that wasn’t why you moved, was it?” Cathou paces impatiently. “Gilles had rappelled down. You waited until the tension was off the ropes, signaling that he had arrived on the ledge. How long would it take him search for and to retrieve the ice axe? A few minutes? Before you stood up, you dug away snow around the buried ice axe—the secondary anchor. It may very well have already been pulled partially out during your rescue. That may have even given you the idea. With the ice axe halfway out, it would have failed quickly, after only a little strain. The rope went slack again, then taut, and—bang! Out it flew, just as you described. Like a whip! Your wife sat up, startled. At first, she looked up at you, realized that you were not Gilles, then looked down at the ropes where they disappeared

from view. She did not notice the cycle of tension and release of stress on the remaining rope as it passed through the masterpoint and up around the bollard. Or if she did, she had no idea what it meant. And in any case, the semi-circular trench held the rope in position.” Gilles pauses again, then asks, “What do you think? How is my story going?”

Roger looks wistfully out the window, past the sunflowers, across the path he and Gaston had walked earlier.

Cathou clenches his fists and shakes them. “*Il ne le nie pas! Chargez-le, pour l’amour du Dieu!*”²⁶

Gaston barks back, “*Il n’y a aucune preuve, Yann!*”²⁷ Cathou throws his head back and kicks the chair that Gaston had been seated in. It clangs along the floor, coming to rest near the doorway. He gives it another small kick to move it out of his way as he leaves.

Roger ignores the commotion behind him. The dense blue sky has given way to clouds moving in from the southeast, suggesting a build-up of moisture from the Mediterranean. Nightfall will bring more clouds and by the morning—typical of Spring storms in the valley—the peaks will be enveloped in pure white again, this storm larger than the small one the previous night, with a foot or two of heavy powder down to just below the tree line. The valley floor will benefit from a cleansing rain.

“So, to continue. Gilles appeared, finally,” says Gaston. “It was just as you described. ‘*Ça y est!*’ and all that. The snow bollard had held. With the trench still holding the rope in place, your wife could not possibly have known what danger Gilles was in.” Gaston retrieves his little notepad and waves it in front of Roger’s face. “She remembered, however, that at a certain point

²⁶ “He doesn’t deny it! Charge him, for the love of God!”

²⁷ “There is no proof, Yann!”

you walked along the trench, tapping your foot along the edge.” He replaces the notepad in his breast pocket. “She was quite clear on this.”

“I told you, I was compacting the snow, making the bollard more secure. I didn’t think the snowpack was dense enough.”

“Yes, yes. Your instinct was to double-check the work of one of the most experienced guides in the valley,” says Gaston.

“After all, the other anchor had failed,” says Roger.

“Ah yes. Quite easily, according to you,” says Gaston. “If we are to believe your story.”

Roger listens half-heartedly to the Inspector. The Guides des Hautes Montagnes incident report most certainly would have triggered an inspection of the rescue site the next day, but the abnormally high moisture content of the precipitation the night of the rescue, combined with high surface temperatures, had to have degraded the snow surface, destroying any evidence of the accident. Otherwise, the Inspector would have already presented the forensics report to Roger. “What your wife did see, was Gilles struggling to climb without his ice axe, one hand affixed to the rope, as he stood up. At which point the rope lifted off the slope—just as you described. And despite the sophistication of the master point, arranged to reduce the load of each pull, this move changed the angle of the rope as it exited the bollard on both sides. The stress upward further deteriorated the edges of the trench holding the rope, which you had weakened with your footsteps along the edge. Gilles’ innocent final tug on the rope with the ascender was enough to dislodge it. What was the look on Gilles’ face, I wonder? You would have seen it, certainly. One of surprise, I imagine. Not fear. He would have seen you upended by the now unanchored rope, his last innocent tug enough to send him backwards, the rope—that had been constrained by the bollard trench—flying past him. He fell without a sound, according to your

wife. And then—*quel moment! Comme si Dieu avait les yeux sur vous!*²⁸ The helicopter arrived! Two of the crew attended to you and your wife. She screamed, “*Il est tombe! Il est tombe!*”²⁹ and pointed down the slope. Two others began to rappel using the helicopter winch. Once inside the helicopter you could no longer see the activity outside, the snow was falling more heavily, visibility further thwarted by the swirl from the helicopter rotors. Soon enough the searchers were back, shaking their heads.”

The Inspector lights another cigarette and inhales deeply. Roger’s gaze remains fixed on the mountains in the distance. White clouds swirl and obscure the top of Mont Blanc. In a few minutes the Aiguille de Midi will be enshrouded as well.

“That’s it?” Roger says. “That’s your story?” He pictures Carol in their hotel room, packing her bags. He is anxious to get there, before she leaves. He believes he can win her back. He is preparing the story he will tell her. He will tell her he is finally ready to start a family. He will tell her he loves her.

The Inspector nods and says, “Yes, that’s it.” He flicks his cigarette to the ground and motions for the nurse. He asks her to notify the doctor that Mr. Nettles is free to go. “There will be the fine to pay, of course, and then you can go to the hotel. Perhaps your wife will still be there, but I doubt it.”

Roger finally turns around to face Gaston. “It’s an excellent story, Inspector,” he says, while eying the stone-faced Yann in the doorway. The nurse arrives with a pile of neatly stacked clothes and places them on the bed. Dr. Petit follows, holding a clipboard which he extends towards Roger with one hand, a pen in the other. “If it has a weakness, it is the part where I

²⁸ “What timing! As if God had his eyes on you!”

²⁹ “He has fallen! He has fallen”

damage the integrity of the bollard trench. Really unlikely. It would have taken quite a while to cause failure.” He signs his release papers.

“If yours has a weakness, Roger,” says Gaston. “It is the part where an experienced guide fails to check the quality of the snow into which he has placed a normally reliable ice axe anchor. Who would believe it?”

“Two different stories,” says Roger, as he, the nurse, and Gaston walk down the hall towards the lobby exit.

“And they cannot *both* be true,” says the Inspector, just as Cathou catches up to him. He cups his hand next to the Inspector’s ear and whispers something. Gaston smiles, thanks Cathou and shakes his hand. The burly guide laughs and walks off in the opposite direction.

“Exactly,” says Roger. His eyes follow Cathou until the guide turns a corner. He asks the Inspector, “Why is he so happy suddenly?”

Gaston gives a sideways glance to Roger. “He said to tell you that your wife expressed a desire to go directly to the train. She had her passport and credit cards. She will not be at the hotel, I’m afraid.”

Roger squints uncomfortably in the glare of sunlight that explodes as the clinic doors are opened for him. The rear door of a police taxi beckons. “We have one stop to make before the hotel, Roger,” says the Inspector, taking one of Roger’s arms as the nurse lets go of the other. The two men sit side by side in the rear seat. The nurse smiles as she closes the door. “*Guides Des Hautes Montagnes, s’il vous plait,*” says Gaston, tapping the driver gently on the shoulder. The driver accelerates roughly. The Inspector says, “We accept Visa or American Express.”

They drive along in silence for a while. The nausea with which the day began reasserts itself and Roger closes his eyes, just as Gaston begins talking.

“I believe there are only two kinds of stories worth telling,” says the tanned and leathery-skinned detective. He does not look at Roger. Rather, he twists his head, lowering it so as to get a better view of the steeply sloped mountainsides north of Les Houches, the rocky peaks hidden from view. “There are the stories which are true, but unbelievable. And there are the stories which are believable, but not true.”

His eyes still closed, Roger says, “You’ve never heard stories that are both believable and true?”

“Yes, but they are usually dull, and not worth telling. And so I seldom hear such stories.”

Roger opens his eyes momentarily, as they pass the steep, tree-lined lower runs of Les Houches/St. Gervais, still bathed in sunlight. He closes his eyes again, and pictures himself skiing there, making long, easy arcs on a soft, lightly powdered surface. Far in front, Gilles skis gracefully, without visible effort. Between them, Carol matches Gilles’ turn arcs. The slope steepens, the snow deepens. Gilles and Carol begin the bouncing, trampoline effect of powder skiing, arms swinging to help establish rhythm. Roger feels this effect in his stomach. Gilles is far ahead, his wife close behind. Suddenly they stop. When he approaches them, they are laughing. They take off together before he arrives. They ski on without him, until they are distant specs against a sea of white. Until they disappear together.

He opens his eyes when the taxi comes to an abrupt stop.

“*Allo*, another dream?” says Gaston. Through the opposite side window, Roger sees the sign: *Bureau de Guides des Hautes Montagnes*. The Inspector holds the door open for Roger.

“Do I have to speak to anyone in there?” asks Roger.

“*Non*,” says Gaston. “I will do the speaking. You will learn how much you owe. You will pay. Then you can go home.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“The truth, of course,” says the Inspector. He walks around to Roger’s side of the and opens the door. He extends his hand. “It is what they expect of me.”