



Firebrands

THRILLER



MARC MÉNARD

Translation by PETER McCAMBRIDGE



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“Most people deceive themselves with a pair of faiths: they believe in *eternal memory* (of people, things, deeds, nations) and in *redressability* (of deeds, mistakes, sins, wrongs). Both are false faiths. In reality the opposite is true: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be redressed.”

Milan Kundera
The Joke

“The world is a cancer eating itself away.”

Henry Miller
Tropic of Cancer

Chapter 1

Montreal, October 2002

Two days from now, Philippe thought, I'll be 40.

He'd dreaded it for the longest time. The date had always seemed so permanent, so definitive. Like the summit of a mountain you'd looked at your whole life, a far-off destination you knew was inevitable but were still in no rush to get to. And once you reached the top, if your ticket was still good, you only got to go down the other side, following the twists and turns of a path long like a tired snake, lower and lower.

Philippe's still-thick hair was barely starting to be flecked by white. His abdomen had a give to it that, 20 years earlier, his flat, hard stomach hadn't known, but he hadn't yet resorted to hiding it under shapeless sweaters. He hadn't smoked in more than a year, kept his drinking reasonable, jogged three times a week, and regularly hit the weights. But there was no getting around it: in two days, he'd be 40.

He sighed.

The young boy at his side looked up and held out his hand with a smile. Philippe took the little hand in his and gave it a squeeze. The light turned green, and they crossed the street. Once they were in the schoolyard, Philippe squatted down next to his son Dominic. In under two minutes, the bell would ring and the children would line up outside the door. He looked around for Lucas, his older son, among the crowd of kids as they shouted and ran around. He found him pretty much right away, hanging from the monkey bars, feet dangling into the void. Their eyes met briefly, and he flashed

him a furtive smile that Lucas returned just as discreetly. He was barely ten, Philippe thought, and Lucas was already distancing himself, as though ashamed at the thought his friends might catch him smiling over at his dad.

Philippe turned back to his younger son, fixed the collar on his windbreaker, and planted a noisy kiss on his cheek. Dominic gave him a smile that alone made the trip worth it. Philippe stood back up and watched with his hands in his pockets as his son walked off, backpack and lunchbox slung over his shoulder, swaying beneath the load. The bell rang. The shouts around him grew louder, and the children began to converge on the school. Philippe sighed again and began the walk back home.

The Friday morning was cool for October. The sky was a blindingly clear azure, a sure sign of the last throes of summer. As always, the heavy traffic had ground to an impatient standstill on Henri-Bourassa. He crossed the boulevard, and the blare of the traffic quickly faded, replaced by the leaves rustling in the wind, the warbling of the starlings, and the squirrels scampering through the maples. The canopy formed by the double row of trees made for a protective screen that more often than not left Philippe feeling calm and collected.

But not today. Today the canopy was gloomy and left him with the same suffocating sensation as the too-low ceiling of a damp cave, the walls of the houses around him cold and smooth as death row. He made a face as he neared home, depressed at the thought of starting his workday. Especially since what was waiting on his desk was a long-winded, sleep-inducing treatise on the perils of globalization, which he was to read and report on for the small publishing house he regularly freelanced for. Almost 40 and still having to take on

contracts like that to put bread on the table—he couldn't take it anymore.

If that was going to be his state of mind, it was shaping up to be a long day.

Maybe he'd take the day off, he thought to himself. He'd put his feet up with a steaming-hot coffee and a good book. An afternoon nap. A dry martini at five o'clock. And that would be that.

His house was in sight. He buried his chin down into his coat collar and quickened his pace. A car he didn't know was parked outside his house, an old Toyota Corolla painted a faded burgundy. He barely gave it a glance before cutting across the paved surface of his parking spot, climbing the few steps that led to his balcony, his key already out. He heard a car door open then close behind him.

"Philippe!"

He was stopped in his tracks. He knew that voice. He hadn't heard it in 15 years, but there was no doubt about it. Low and gravelly, with something vaguely Germanic about it. A voice that had always radiated, the way he remembered it, uncommon strength and assurance. Though at that very moment, even when uttering no more than the two syllables of his first name, the voice seemed weak and indecisive, more hoarse than husky, weary.

"Mora?" he said, whirling around.

Standing in the road, both hands on the roof of his car, Robert Moranowitz gave Philippe a nod and a tired smile. Philippe plodded over to the Corolla, distraught at how Mora looked. His features were the picture of exhaustion: hollowed-out cheeks, and eyelids drooping down like crumpled curtains over washed-out grey eyes. His hair was dull and greasy, grey in places, and his shoulders were hunched, his

back threatening to give way beneath a seemingly unbearable weight. The raincoat he was wearing was loose-fitting, but he still looked worryingly thin. A corpse, thought Philippe.

Philippe hesitated between tears and anger, not sure if he should be happy or furious. He wanted to cry with joy, to give Mora a kiss and hold him in his arms tight enough to crack a few bones, then strangle him and beat him black and blue for his unbroken silence, for 15 years without a word. But sadness won the day; the powerful, indestructible man he'd once known now resembled no more than a shadow of his former self.

Seeing Philippe's face fall, Mora shrugged his shoulders, putting on a wry smile.

"I look like a ghost, eh? Better yet: the reincarnation of my grandfather, if he'd made it out of the death camps!" he added, raising his arms to the heavens. "The truth is, alas, much more unremarkable."

Mora shrugged his shoulders again, and Philippe didn't know what to say.

"Hepatitis C," Mora told him. "My liver's toast, and all the meds I'm on are chipping away at the rest."

His laugh rolled around in his throat like a pebble on a riverbed. Philippe took a step forward, and their hands clasped over the roof of the car. They stood like that for a moment, not saying a word.

"You coming in for a coffee?" Philippe asked.

"No, no. I want to have a chat, but not here. There must be a nice café around here somewhere."

Philippe ordered a latte and Mora a tea. Seeing Mora shiver and adjust the collar of his raincoat around his neck, Philippe

suggested a table that was well away from the door. They sat opposite each other and, looking around them, stirred their drinks with the end of their spoons, like two painfully shy men who didn't know how to strike up a conversation.

Philippe rubbed his temples. He'd waited for a sign from Mora for a long time, hoping to see him reappear. A visit, a phone call, a letter, an email, anything. As the years passed, he'd had to come to terms with the incredible idea that Mora wasn't invincible. That he'd finally gone one step too far. He'd crossed the line and paid the price. Confronted with silence, Philippe had tried hard to forget Mora, his plans, his friends, and his network. Mora and the harebrained schemes he'd allowed himself to be dragged into.

But how could he forget? How could he erase from his memory the intense discussions, the laughter and the tears, the cause he had believed in, the flawed reasoning and the false pretences, not to mention all the violence they'd waded into?

Until that morning, Philippe had thought he'd managed it. At the very least, he thought he'd buried the young Philippe, the hothead with the devil-may-care attitude. But he was realizing that his friend's unexpected reappearance was reawakening old demons, the angry young man who was ready to support Mora's struggle.

The bitterness that washed over him was so strong he couldn't hold back a grimace. Mora replied with a smile that briefly revived the memory of past vigour. He straightened his tall body and brought his hands together above his cup of tea.

"I know you can't wait to give me the third degree, but just hold off a minute, would you? First, I'd like to talk about you. I've been doing my homework."

Philippe raised his eyebrows in concern. Mora “doing his homework” on someone was no joke.

Mora gave Philippe a look and plunged his hand into the inside pocket of his raincoat, producing a bundle of paper. He unfolded the sheets and carefully smoothed them out.

“What do we have here?” Mora went on, setting a pair of reading glasses down onto his nose. “Let’s start in 1987, if that’s okay with you. June 1987, to be more precise. You’ve rushed back from Paris, PhD abandoned, no great surprise considering how little work you put into it. In Montreal, you get back in touch with a few professors you used to work with, who find you a contract or two as a research assistant, enough to get you back on your feet. You forget all about macroeconomics and the world economy to study media and culture, even going so far as to start a PhD in sociology, but only for a year. You seem to have a recurring problem with PhDs, by the look of things. Unless you just run out of steam?”

“Drop it.”

“Fair enough. In the meantime, you try to get back with Madeleine, who’s been back in Montreal since Christmas 1986. Congratulations. I never realized you were so determined to follow your heart.”

Philippe shook his head, but Mora didn’t even look up.

“It worked out, and you’ve been living together since winter 1988. Madeleine works in radio as a freelance researcher until she carves out a place for herself. Meanwhile, you hop from contract to contract, researching for government ministries and various professional associations. You too end up making a name for yourself, and slowly but surely you become one of the go-to guys in your field.”

“I’m not sure that’s how I’d have put it.”

“Doesn’t matter. In 1993, you have a little boy, Lucas. Then a second in 1996, Dominic. Unfortunately, that same year your father dies, then your mother one year later. The inheritance isn’t a fortune, but since you’re an only son it’s enough of a little nest egg to substantially improve things for your family, and you buy a house in Ahuntsic. All good so far?”

“More or less, yeah.”

“Great. So let’s move on to the other side of your life. Just give me a sec.”

Mora peered down at his pile of paper.

“Here we go! You belong to groups that support the poor, immigrants, the elderly, and the homeless. Under-the-radar pressure groups concerned with protecting the environment, sustainable development, GMOs, and the impact of globalization. It’s a long list and, to be honest, anyone would be doing well to join the dots between them all. If you ask me, it looks a lot like you’re spreading yourself in all directions, looking in vain for the one cause to make everything make sense. Ah yes, and the best is still to come.”

“What?”

“You’re also a coach’s assistant with Lucas’s baseball team, Mosquito category. Shame the season’s over, I’d have loved to see you at work. Just imagining you in your uniform makes me shudder.”

“Very funny.”

“Thing is, if it weren’t for the small matter of a file that’s still open at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service...”

Philippe almost choked.

“What? CSIS has a file on me?”

“Of course, they do. What did you think? They’re paid to open files and gather information on people who pose a threat to this wonderful country of ours. But don’t worry: there’s nothing serious. Just a lot of old stuff everyone’s forgotten about by now. Almost nothing really. Wait, just let me check something...”

Mora began leafing frantically through his pile of paper, while Philippe rubbed his temples again.

“There we are!” Mora rejoiced, brandishing a particularly crumpled page. “Member of the Montreal Citizens’ Group and the pressure group For a Renewed Socialism... helping squatters who are demanding social housing and feminist shock troops... protests... the odd fight... accusations of assault, twice... vandalism... Nothing serious, like I said.”

“Good.”

Despite trying his best to appear unmoved, Philippe was a little relieved.

“Now what’s really surprising about your file is that there’s nothing after 1986. I have no choice but to conclude that you’ve been transformed into an upstanding family man. Your conscience is clear: taking care of the kids, volunteering for respectable groups, and no doubt mowing your lawn once a week.”

“It’s a bit depressing, when you put it like that.”

“That it is. Did I forget anything?”

“You did. Why is this middle-class existence of any interest to you? And, while I’m at it: where the hell were you for the past 15 years, and why didn’t you ever let me know you were still alive, you bastard?”

Mora dropped his act and turned serious again.

“Why? For one very simple reason: I managed to find a way out. But since I could already hear the police sirens, I didn’t try to catch up to you. I ran away instead.”

“And Wolf?”

Mora leaned over the table and clasped his hands together.

“Can you believe that after all those years, he ended up getting caught. The bullet I left in his leg must’ve slowed him down.”

“Why didn’t you try to get in touch with me?”

“Because you’d have wanted to meet up. Wolf might have been in prison, but his men might have been looking for us. It was better to go our separate ways, for both our sakes. By the time I was sure the danger had passed, you were already back in Montreal. I decided to leave things as they were. I’d had enough of dragging you into everything. I’d screwed things up for you enough as it was. I’d rather let you think I was dead. It seemed easier that way.”

“And the others? What happened to them? I couldn’t get in touch with anyone at all.”

“They did what I told them to do if things went south: cut off all contact, move home, forget the whole sorry business, and start over.”

“And why was I never told that?”

Mora chuckled. He straightened up in his seat and crossed his arms.

“No need. You followed it all to the letter. Out of instinct. Just like I knew you would.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, but it would’ve been nice to hear it, all the same.”

Mora shrugged, and the two of them went quiet again.

“And why the sudden urge to see me again?” Philippe asked, a terrible feeling gnawing at his stomach.

Mora’s eyes suddenly lit up with a feverish glow.

“Wolf was freed a year ago. He’s rebuilt everything, member by member, cell by cell. Working out of the shadows, as usual. It took me a year, but I managed to track him down. It’s payback time, Philippe. Time to root out the weeds, once and for all.”

Philippe raised his eyebrows in disbelief, waiting for Mora to go on.

“But I’ll need your help.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Philippe replied, his voice deathly quiet.