A Curse and a Blessing: Unearthing My Family's History of Suicide in Rural Québec

When I was twenty years old, I learned from my father that five men in my mother's family had killed themselves. Later, I learned how each one died. In 1946, her grandfather Arthur, 65, drowned himself; in 1949, her great-uncle Arcadius, 70, hanged himself; in 1973, her first cousin Yvon, 30, shot himself; in 1983, her other first cousin Réginald, 46, hanged himself; and in 1984, her first cousin once removed Harold, 14, hanged himself. The first three killed themselves in her hometown of Saint-Léon, Québec, the last two in nearby villages. Her father, Louis-Étienne, seriously considered shooting himself, as did her brother, Serge. People in Saint-Léon blamed the suicides on the *malédiction*, or curse, a priest put on the Nadeau family in the 1940's, after a dispute over, of all things, where people should be buried. For years, my mother kept her family history a secret, fearing that if my younger brother or I found out, we would feel doomed to suicide ourselves.

And yet, for years, I'd thought about killing myself almost every day. These ideations felt so involuntary, so instinctive, I assumed everyone thought about suicide as frequently and vividly as I did. That morning in New Haven, my father could sense I was depressed and offered my mother's family history as a kind of explanation. He brought it up casually, but it was a revelation. Part of me had always felt I was pretending to be suicidal as a coping mechanism: life was more bearable with an end in sight. Once I learned that suicide ran in my family, I realized I might actually want to die: a validating realization; a harrowing one.

I decided to spend the summer in Saint-Léon, both because I was too suicidal to look for a job and because time was running out: after five generations, my uncle Serge, nearing eighty, was the last Nadeau left in Saint-Léon. I thought the experience would make for a dramatic memoir. I had an ego and wanted to write something profound.

A couple days after I learned about the suicides, though, I stopped thinking about my family and kept thinking about killing myself. Their deaths brought my own into terrifying, transfixing

focus. More frequently and intrusively than ever before, I thought about jumping off the parking garage near the student health center, hanging myself, walking in front of cars, buying a gun. I read online forums from dark corners of the internet that didn't try to convince you either way, just told you how to tie a noose. I ignored the Suicide Helpline alert that pops up when you search how to kill yourself. I figured it was for people who felt alone and needed to hear platitudes about how much they were loved. I knew I was loved. I just didn't feel as though I loved anyone or anything enough to keep living.

Eventually, I made a plan to hang myself with a belt from my closet door. Every night, I lay in bed and thought about doing it until I fell asleep. One night at the end of April, I made the belt into a noose, put it on my neck, and yanked to see how it felt. It felt good, so I wedged one end in the door and hung on to it to see if it would support my weight. It did, so I sat on the edge of my bed, wanting to cry. I knew it would devastate my parents. I thought about writing a note saying it wasn't their fault. I thought about writing a note saying it wasn't anybody's fault, which was true, but a platitude. I realized there was nothing I could write to console the people I loved, so I went to the student health center. I just wanted a safe place to sleep, but they sent me in an ambulance to the hospital, where I lay in a gurney for hours before they wheeled me to the psychiatric observation unit. The next day, they wheeled me to the adolescent psychiatric ward, where I stayed for a week. My parents visited me every day. When the hospital psychiatrist asked if I had a family history of depression, my mother told him about the suicides, about how her father and brother had seriously considered killing themselves, about how she had thought about it herself. The psychiatrist was taken aback. My mother told him I was planning on spending the summer researching our family's history in Québec, hoping he would say it was a bad idea, that it would make me more suicidal. But he didn't say anything, and a month later, I was in Saint-Léon.

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My aunt and uncle were so excited to have me. I'd never stayed with them for more than a couple days or talked to them at length. I kept apologizing for my French and they kept apologizing for being poor. "*Pauvrété!*" Serge exclaimed, laughing and gesturing at everything broken: the finicky blinds in the living room, the split laminate countertops in the kitchen, the flaking paint in the pantry. I slept on a stack of gym mats in the sunken playroom where I'd once wrestled with my cousin Carl, now thirty-six and married in Québec City. Serge, Lucille, and I shared a bathroom with a lavender toilet and a purple curtain veiling a window full of green: in every direction, resplendent pastures, carved out of thickets of evergreens. Lucille did all my laundry before I got the chance. It was surreal and stunning, seeing my corduroys billow on a clothesline.

For breakfast, they put out white porcelain dishes full of strawberries and blueberries: expensive fruits they wouldn't have bought otherwise. They kept their toaster unplugged to save on electricity, and wouldn't let me do the dishes, both because they were generous hosts and because I used too much water. The kitchen table was ringed with black metal folding chairs and littered with dog food: three times a day, Serge sat at the head and chopped kibble into smaller pieces for Mignonne, their mangy, off-white lapdog. He doted on Mignonne — French for "cute" — dressing her in tiny denim jackets and bouncing her on his knee while he drove. After meals, we sat in the living room, a nook with a tube T.V. and two ratty recliners that snapped out like traps. Lucille sang along operatically to commercial jingles while Serge answered questions about our family.

"*Saint-Léon est mort,*" he announced at dinner my first night. "Saint-Léon is dead." He was sitting at the head of the table, his arms exposed and folded in front of a pile of dog food. He wore the same outfit every day: a sleeveless workout shirt — tight around his paunch with a low-cut neck that revealed his wooden crucifix in a tangle of black chest hair — baggy basketball shorts, dress socks, and mud-caked sneakers with the soles hanging off. When it was cool or buggy, he put on a pilling beige cardigan that fell off his shoulders like a shawl. He had a farmer's tan, crepey sun-spotted skin that hung under his arms, veiny legs, buzzed black hair in a widow's peak, and a jowly

face creased with laugh lines. He talked frenetically and smiled often. Sometimes he zoned out and started playing with his dentures, thrusting them out and wiggling them between his front gums before slurping them back in.

"*Saint-Léon est mort*," Lucille echoed. The village's population had dwindled to around a thousand people, half its peak in the seventies. Save for a one-aisle grocery store and a few other odd shops, the businesses had all shuttered, including the *dépanneur*, or corner store, that Serge had run out of the front of his home for a quarter-century. Some people had jobs in neighboring towns, but most lived off welfare. The few who left for college never came back. Families were selling the farms they'd lived on for generations. Serge and Lucille wanted to move forty-five minutes south to the waterfront town of Saint-Georges, but first, they needed to sell their home: a trailer-like one-story with three rickety steps in lieu of a front porch and a tract of gravel in lieu of a front lawn. For years, they'd had a black and red À VENDRE sign propped on their windowsill — flanked by Catholic paraphernalia for good luck — but even at $69,000 Canadian ($50,000 U.S.), they hadn't received any offers. To the right of their home was a shuttered gas station, its ruby red DIESEL sign shimmery like a mirage. To the left was my grandmother Marie-Jeanne's old home — a hulking, white-vinyl box at the bottom of a hill blanketed with purple and yellow weeds — where my mother grew up and her father, Louis-Étienne, died.

Across the street were the town bar — recently reopened after being shut down for serving teens — and a gazebo on the former site of the *casse-croûte*, or snack stand, that had burned down three years prior. Rumor had it that the owners set it on fire to collect the property insurance and move out of Saint-Léon. Behind the bar and the gazebo ran the Etchémin river, named after the native tribe who had traversed it before the French colonized Québec in the seventeenth century. The Etchémin separated Saint-Léon's northeast rangs — neighborhoods of ten to fifteen family farms — from those in the southwest, snaking through the heart of the village where the parish's massive, barn red church towered over everyone's homes. From the ridge above Serge's house, you

could see its sheet metal roof glittering in the sun, its white bell tower carved in relief against a huge, flat, farmland sky.

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My family's history is intertwined with that of Saint-Léon, its church, and the Etchémin. In 1858, French-Canadians on the outskirts of the largely Irish parish of Saint-Malachie decided to build their own chapel, on a parcel of land donated by my great-great-great-grandfather Jean-Baptiste. As recompense, the parishioners named the rang in his honor and promised him and his family free burial services when they died. The chapel was built that fall, a one-room shack with an ox-eye window above the door and a small bell tower. Everyone wore their best clothes to the first service: women in violet and red flannel skirts, beautiful woolen shawls and *sabots*, men in their finest cloth trousers and *bottes sauvages*. They named the new parish Saint-Léon in honor of its first priest, Louis François-Léon Rousseau.

Those early parishioners were ready to give their lives for their faith. In 1922, when their first church caught fire, they ran in to save the crucifixion altarpiece and other sacred objects. That winter, they deprived themselves, saving every penny to rebuild. As *L'histoire d'une église: Saint-Léon-de-Standon* explains, "Losing one's church is like losing one's home," except the second church was ten times bigger than any of their homes and twenty times more expensive: the equivalent of over a million Canadian dollars today. Later, the parish's tenth priest, Leonidas Verreault, raised even more money to buy an organ for the knave and a sunroom for the presbytery. He also opened a second cemetery on the opposite bank of the Etchémin, not realizing that every spring, when the snow melted and the river overflowed, the land flooded.

The Etchémin had a will of its own. For years, residents on the wrong side of the river had braved its torrential current on horseback to attend Mass. (A bridge was finally built in 1931.) One time, a man tried to walk on a felled tree to pick from a *manna*, or godsend, of blueberries on the other bank, only to slip and drown in one of the river's twenty-foot-high chutes. Another time, six

rafters drowned in front of the church while transporting wood to Saint-Malachie. When parishioners held a special Mass to ask God for rain during a months-long drought, the river flooded, destroying the dam they'd built to prevent water from flowing out of the Saint-Léon stretch. As the architect of the dam put it, "By God, a big Mass was too strong. A small Mass would have sufficed."

Sure enough, spring came and the graves in the new cemetery flooded. People in Saint-Léon were protective of their dead. (In 1922, after evacuating the burning church, they'd rushed into the shed next-door where corpses were stored during the winter, when the ground was too hard for burials.) A group of parishioners asked Verreault to relocate the new cemetery, but the priest was notoriously obstinate. Legend had it that in his previous church, he'd challenged an irreverent parishioner to a fistfight. When the man said he wouldn't hit a priest, Verreault tore off his cassock.

My great-grandfather Arthur rallied nine men to defy the priest and open a third cemetery higher up the riverbank, but on the day of their first burial, Verreault loyalists barricaded the entrance. "They're already dead," the loyalists joked. "They can't drown." In response, the dissidents blocked the bridge to Verreault's cemetery, armed with rakes and bludgeons. Sunday Masses devolved into shouting matches between the two camps, seated on opposite sides of the nave. Verreault often digressed from his sermons into tirades against Arthur and the others, calling them cattle that needed to be steered by their nose rings. One Sunday, the bishop came and told the dissidents that if they didn't obey Verreault, they would all go to hell. "We'll see you there," one of them retorted. They threatened to kill Verreault if the bishop didn't remove the priest himself.

In 1945, at the height of the conflict, Verreault invoked a *malédiction*, or curse, upon my great-grandfather Arthur and his family. A few months later, Arthur's youngest son, Félicien, died of mouth cancer at eighteen. People around the rang heard him scream. Word spread, and soon, everyone in the parish saw Félicien as the first victim of the *malédiction*. Arthur's wife blamed her husband for killing their youngest son.

Arthur visited Verreault twice to ask for a pardon. It's unclear if he believed in the curse or if he just needed to be absolved in the eyes of those who did. Regardless, the priest refused, so Arthur — a butcher — tried to hang himself in his slaughterhouse. He made a noose from the rope he'd used to string up cows by their hind legs for slaughter. His sister, visiting from her home in Massachusetts, walked in before he could jump off the slaughtering platform. Months later, Arthur and his son, my grandfather Louis-Étienne, were walking back from the hayfield for dinner when Arthur suddenly turned around and started sprinting towards the river. Arthur didn't drown himself that night, but Louis-Étienne knew then that it was coming. Sure enough, Louis-Étienne came out of the slaughterhouse a few days later to find footprints in the pasture grass: one of his older brothers had fallen asleep while keeping watch over Arthur. Louis-Étienne chased the footprints to the river, where he found his father thrashing in the water. He watched as his father tried to grab a tree branch, only for it to break off in his hand. Like his father, Louis-Étienne didn't know how to swim, so he ran back to the house to get help. He and some others returned to find Arthur's body washed up on the riverbank, still in his overalls.

I wonder why Arthur jumped in the river, instead of hanging himself as he had tried to at first, or shooting himself with the gun he used to kill cows before slaughter. Was it a symbolic gesture? A surrender to Verreault? To God? To the Etchémin? A protest against all three? Or did he just think drowning would be the least painful way to die? And why did he grab the tree branch? Did he see his son and realize he had something to live for? Or was it just a survival reflex?

Three years later, Arthur's brother Arcadius hanged himself. "The curse must end," someone cried out at the funeral. A month later, my uncle Serge was born. Some time that year, electricity came to the rangs of Saint-Léon, and the bishop finally blessed the dissidents' cemetery. Verreault was relocated to a new parish, where rumor had it, he drove another man to kill himself.

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My second week in Saint-Léon, Serge took me to the farm, a ten-minute drive from his home on the opposite bank of the Etchémin. It was breathtaking, the rolling pastures streaked with yellow weeds, the massive, barn red slaughterhouse silhouetted against a sharp blue sky. Serge had inherited the farm from Louis-Étienne who had inherited it from Arthur. He'd been trying to sell it ever since, but in the meantime, he rented it out. The current tenants had repainted his childhood bedroom purple and gutted the sunroom for storage. We crossed a gravel lot crowded with trucks and tractors into the abandoned slaughterhouse. To the left was the hay-lined pit where cows used to live during the winter, and to the right, the slaughtering platform where Arthur had almost hanged himself, empty save for a chair facing a cut-out window facing the river. It reminded me of a church nave: the vaulted ceilings, the thin plank walls backlit like stained glass, the platform like a pulpit. I thought about my room in New Haven: how cavernous it had felt when I'd thought about hanging myself; like a void; like the inside of my brain.

Serge told me that Louis-Étienne never talked about his father's suicide. One day, though, while they were working the hayfield, Louis-Étienne showed his son the place on the riverbank where he'd found Arthur's body. The spot had since grown a suicide-deterrent fence of brush, so Serge and I walked ten yards downstream. I asked him if he felt emotional, standing near where his grandfather had killed himself, but he didn't. He never knew Arthur, though he grew up in the shadow of his grandfather's suicide. Of Arthur's ten children, Louis-Étienne had been the one to watch his father drown, find his body, inherit the farm, keep on slaughtering. For years after, he had thought about going into the slaughterhouse and shooting himself with the same gun he used to shoot the cows. The only thing that stopped him was the thought of abandoning his son.

Serge and my grandmother, Marie-Jeanne, bore the brunt of my grandfather's depression, his drinking. My mother was born eighteen years after her brother and had an idyllic childhood in comparison. When she was two, they left the farm for a new home down the road from the church. Louis-Étienne converted the living room into a roadside butcher shop and rented out the farmhouse

to American bohemians who grew weed on the pastures. Every winter, Serge manned the family business while my mother spent three months with her parents at a snowbird colony in Florida. Though she missed a third of every school year, she was the best student in her class. Back in Québec, she spent her weekends shopping in the nearby city of Lévis for books and records. She loved Agatha Christie and Ozzy Osbourne: murder mysteries and "Crazy Train" brought suspense to her monotonous life in farmland Québec.

Meanwhile, the Nadeau curse became regional lore. One of my mother's cousins learned about it in school, when a classmate showed her a drawing based on the legend of Arthur's suicide: a body flailing in the Etchémin, a hat and pipe left on the riverbank.

But then the curse continued. In 1973 — my mother was seven and Serge was twenty-four — their thirty-three-year-old cousin Yvon killed himself in Saint-Léon, two days before the anniversary of Arthur's death. Like Louis-Étienne, Yvon was a butcher and an alcoholic. He went into the garage between his home and his father's and shot himself in the forehead with a twelve-gauge. His wife was in the kitchen. The sound of the sausage-maker drowned out the shot, but when she went outside to throw out her husband's empty beer crates, she heard gasping. She thought it was one of the cows until she found her husband in the garage. After the funeral, she went on a Church retreat, where a priest recognized her as one of the "Nadeaus who had killed Verreault."

A decade later, another one of Serge and my mother's cousins, Réginald, killed himself at forty-six. He had no immediate family and lived an hour and a half away from Saint-Léon, but he kept in touch with Louis-Étienne. He called his uncle the day before he hanged himself. He said he was very sick and that he needed help. Like Yvon and Louis-Étienne, he was a butcher and an alcoholic.

A year after Réginald, Serge and my mother's cousin-once-removed Harold hanged himself. He was fourteen. At the funeral, the priest blamed his parents for not going to church.

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For centuries, suicide was one of the most heinous crimes you could commit in Catholic Québec. In the 1700s, the corpses of people who had "murdered themselves" were dragged face down through the streets before being hung by their feet in the village square. The Church refused to bury their bodies, leaving their souls eternally damned. Suicide wasn't officially decriminalized in Canada until 1972, by which point it had become an epidemic. Between 1950 and 2000, the number of suicides in Québec increased ninefold (compared to twofold across the rest of Canada) with men killing themselves at three times the rate of women. Sociologists attribute this surge to the dissolution of patriarchal social structures like the parish and the nuclear family during the "Quiet Revolution" of the 1950s, when the agrarian, deeply religious province transformed into an urban-industrial one, increasingly estranged from the Church and other traditional institutions. As the Montréal psychiatrist and politician Camille Laurin put it, "those three great lodestars of authority — God, country, and family — lost their magic power," leaving men especially vulnerable to suicide.

Serge once told my mother that he struggled to get up in the morning because the thought of having to breathe all day was so agonizing. Another time, he broke down sobbing in the butcher shop, bashing his head against the walls and screaming that he wanted to die. After just a semester of college, he dropped out to work on the farm full-time. He was stuck in Saint-Léon. Meanwhile, my mother graduated top of her class from a master's program in Montréal before coming to Rochester, New York for her Ph.D. She barely spoke English and found life in a Rust Belt city depressing: the sky was always grey and crowded with factory spires. My father was a Rochester native and an engineer at Xerox, one of the city's boom-era manufacturing giants. They met at a bar. Four years later, they got married in Saint-Léon. My mother kept her name. Serge drove them to the ceremony in the turquoise Pontiac he had inherited from his aunt. Even then, he was much poorer than my parents. He couldn't give them much for their wedding, but he was proud to chauffeur them in such a nice car.

Bedridden with emphysema, Louis-Étienne missed the ceremony. He hadn't been to church since his father's suicide, but before he died, he renewed his faith, filling his home with crucifixes and other votives. All eight hundred of the church's seats were full for his funeral. Everyone in Saint-Léon knew him from long conversations at the butcher shop.

Three years before Louis-Étienne died, my mother's childhood friend Brigitte interviewed him for a documentary about the cemetery conflict entitled *Les Eaux Mortes*, or "Dead Water." Before I left for Saint-Léon, my mother reluctantly agreed to help me translate it. I hardly knew what my grandfather looked like, let alone how he spoke, but then, there he was, talking about how for years after his father's suicide, he'd thought about going into the slaughterhouse and shooting himself. He started crying, his shoulders heaving under a grey cable knit sweater. He looked exactly like my mother: pursed lips, high cheekbones, big nose, fine brown hair. I kept pestering her to translate until I looked over and saw that she too was crying, her face buried in a blanket.

My mother left Saint-Léon more than three decades ago. She rarely talks about her family. She's a corporate executive now, richer than they could have ever imagined. Every month, she sends Serge a check for three hundred dollars. She knows her family is prone to suicide, but she dismisses the idea of a "curse" as Catholic folklore. When my parents' wedding videographer lost all the footage of their Catholic ceremony in Saint-Léon, she joked to Brigitte, "*La malédiction continue!"*

Serge, on the other hand, has never left Saint-Léon, never left the house next to his parents' butcher shop, never sold the farm where his grandfather killed himself and where his father thought about killing himself and where he grew up slaughtering cows. He stopped butchering a few years after I was born — in 2000, revamped health standards forced him to start renting DVD's instead — but in *Les Eaux Mortes*, there's a shot of him in the *dépanneur*, hunched over a tough cut of meat. "The cemetery conflict has affected a lot of people. A lot of people" he says, his voice haggard, his last few teeth scraggly and brown, his face gaunt. "There is a curse on Saint-Léon."

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I grew up knowing a different family in a different Saint-Léon. Every August and December, we made the ten-hour drive up from Rochester. The first nine hours were on highways, but the last stretch was through pitch-black farm country, on a narrow road with quick turns and shadowy evergreens lining the guardrails. Sometimes the trees thinned out and you could see the grey silhouettes of silos and barns on the hills. And then, in the distance, a tract of asphalt lit blue by streetlamps. The ruby red DIESEL sign suspended and shimmering in the dark.

My grandmother was always jittery with excitement, pacing in her nightgown as we brought in our luggage. We stayed on her second floor, shag-carpeted and littered with chip shards and cigarette butts. When we weren't there, she chain-smoked in a beach chair on the balcony, eating Doritos and drinking from liter bottles of Pepsi that Serge brought over from the *dépanneur*. My brother, Henri, and I slept on a black sectional with neon geometric print, me on the long end, him on the short end, our toes touching in the middle. My mother's childhood bedroom looked like a Polaroid: the pink walls blanched, the muslin curtains still, the lamp light hazy and yellow. Opposite the bed was a wooden armoire with a glass display case full of childhood tchotchkes: ornamental plates and stiff rag dolls. A thick-paned, translucent window in the bathroom blurred the hill behind my grandmother's home into a color swatch: white in the winter, green, yellow, and purple with wildflowers in the summer. In the winter, we went sledding; in the summer, we rolled down it. My grandmother loved poker, so at night, we scrounged for pennies to use as chips. She didn't have internet, so even after we got phones, Saint-Léon felt like a place stuck in time.

Sometimes, my mother gave her mother "makeovers" against her will, scrubbing her face, pulling her loose skin taut to apply eyeliner, dying her hair red in the kitchen sink as my grandmother shouted out Québécois swear words, or "church slurs": "*Crisse*" (Christ), "*calice*" (the chalice), "*hostie*" (the communion wafer), and "*tabernacle*" (the box on a church altar). For dinner, we got burgers and poutine — French fries topped with gravy and cheese curds — from the *casse-*

croûte across the street. Afterwards, my father took us to Serge's *dépanneur* to rent movies. We browsed the eye-level family section beneath the pornos as my father spoke English with a French accent to communicate with Serge. Serge always insisted we didn't have to pay, but my father made him keep a tab, so that when my parents gave him a check at the end of our trip, it didn't feel like charity.

Every time we left Saint-Léon, my grandmother stood sobbing on her porch, clutching the railing with one hand and waving hard with the other as we drove away. My mother couldn't bring herself to look up from her Kindle, but I always jerked my head back and waved through the tinted rear window of our minivan.

In 2014, a few months after being anesthetized for hip surgery, my grandmother stopped recognizing us or speaking in full sentences. When she stopped speaking altogether, Serge moved her to her first nursing home, about an hour outside of Saint-Léon. When she stopped walking, he moved her to her current facility, bigger than the first one and more hospital-like. During the day, the residents sit in rows of wheelchairs, awake but completely still, staring at a rabbit in a cage. Most of the rooms have radios tuned to classical music stations, scented candles to mask the smell of urine, plush armchairs for visitors, gauzy curtains that blur the view of the cemetery next door. I don't know why we haven't made her room homier. Her window is grimy and crowded with tombstones. There are a few family photos on her dresser.

We usually come right before lunch so we can feed her. My mother pushes her fat lower lip down with a spoon until her jaw triggers open, wiping the dribble from her shirt and swabbing out her sunken eye cavities with a coarse rag. She still gives her mother "makeovers," applying eyeliner and combing the knots out of her hair. Sometimes, my grandmother opens her eyes, scared, then angry, digging her nails into my mother's arm, gnawing on her fingers. My mother pinches her cheeks and talks to her like a child. "*Mamie! Âllo Mamie! Comment ça va Mamie? Ça va Mamie? Es-tu bien, Mamie? Pauvre Mamie. Pauvre Mamie.*"

In the summer, Henri and I take her out. There's a code like we're entering a vault. Something clicks and the vestibule floods with air: headwinds of foliage, tailwinds of urine and antiseptic. We wince in the sun. The parking lot isn't paved so her wheelchair jounces over divots. We let her roll down inclines before running to catch her by the handles. At first, we held her head against the headrest to keep it from lolling forwards, but now her neck is locked perpendicular to her body, so we tilt the chair onto its back wheels until her body is horizontal and her eyes are looking ahead. We roll her to the edge of the cemetery and pry open her eyelids so she can see the hills and the sun.

As we leave, my mother asks the nurses if there's anything her mother needs. She feels guilty for not visiting more often, so she buys shampoo, soap, socks in bulk: provisions for when they're apart. When we get in the car, she either reads work emails in silence or cries.

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I've only seen my mother get emotional a handful of times. When I was ten, she had a breakdown after we came home from a trip to find the refrigerator broken and all the food spoiled. She started sobbing and shrieking and went up to the master bathroom. A couple neighbors heard her wailing and called 911. Two ambulances and a fire truck came and took her to the psychiatric ward at Rochester General. Henri and I ran barefoot across the front lawn to stay with our neighbors. The next morning, we came back to get our shoes and found my mother and father talking in the kitchen. She hugged us for a long time. I thought she might cry but she didn't. Then we went back out to play on our neighbors' trampoline. We didn't talk about it again until I was in the Yale-New Haven psychiatric hospital, when my father made a joke about how they'd let her out too quickly. I thought back to that night and remembered her screaming, "I want to kill myself."

My first night in the hospital, I was watching *Coco* on a little TV in a plastic case when a guy around my age leaned in and whispered that he'd been admitted for threatening to kill his parents. I could feel his beard on my face. He told me that his parents had been acting like cunts, so

he'd attacked them with a shovel. I couldn't focus on the rest of *Coco*. The next day, I walked into the waiting room to find him slouched next to them, his arms folded across his lap like a sulking child's.

At night, my roommate and I debriefed before curfew, our feet dangling off the ends of our gurney beds. His girlfriend had broken up with him, so he'd tried to hang himself. Now, she wanted to keep dating, but he had decided to go back to Florida to be with his parents. He didn't know what he was going to do down there, but he was excited to be somewhere warm. He was so grateful to be alive. It was really moving. I forget everyone's names now, but I felt so close to them then.

My parents visited me every day. My father had just gotten laid off, but my mother skipped work. She seemed less worried about me killing myself once I got out, and didn't indulge any of my angst about "life's purpose." Everyone else tried to convince me that things would get better, but she just sat with me and read: me, a copy of *Lord of the Flies* I'd stolen from the observation unit, her, a murder mystery on her Kindle. As a child, she'd loved murder mysteries for their suspense, but as an adult, she told me, she loved them for their sobriety. She got wrapped up in the plot, not the characters, so she didn't get emotional. When she was younger, she read a lot of capital-L literature in English and French, but ever since she'd moved to the States, she'd avoided things that made her sad. She loved "murder shows": not the cinematic Netflix series about high-profile cases, but the low-budget Investigation Discovery reenactments of everyday murders. For some reason, these simulations of violence calmed her down.

My fourth or fifth day in the hospital, while my father was taking a walk, my mother told me that "life isn't about being happy." I forget the context. She didn't elaborate. My *pauvre mamie.* You have watched so many people you love suffer: your cousins kill themselves, your brother threaten to kill himself, your child threaten to kill himself, your father's lungs fail, your mother's memory fail. And to think of all you have suffered, alone in the dark, worlds away from everyone

you loved. Of course you expect nothing, cherish nothing, feel nothing. To feel is to doubt. Life is a privilege. It is a choice. This is how we protect ourselves. This is how we survive.

After I got out of the hospital, I wanted to take a long walk back to my house at Yale. I loved New Haven in the spring — the swollen tulips, the trees jeweled with purple buds — but my parents insisted on driving me. Everything looked shadowy through the tinted back window of our minivan. I felt like a kid again, watching my father steer and my mother read her Kindle, her face reflected in the passenger window. Then I felt like an adult, coming back to his childhood bedroom. Everything looked smaller than I'd remembered it, and grimy. Something about the light. My belt was still wedged in the closet door. I felt silly, like I had playacted suicide. I told myself I would never go back to the psych ward. I would either kill myself or I wouldn't.

A week later, we went on a family vacation to Ireland. For ten days, we hiked the coastline. My parents were slow, so Henri and I shot ahead, sprinting up cliffs to see the ocean rail against the rocks below. I felt a residual impulse to jump, but mostly I felt like a child, playing with my brother, in a foreign place full of green. I didn't feel grateful to be alive, but I also didn't want to die, so I was happy. After my family flew back, I went to Paris and fell in love. I stopped in London and stayed with two college friends who were on writing fellowships that I had applied for but didn't get. We went to the Tate Museum and saw Jenny Holzer's "Truisms." I took a picture of one that read, "In a dream you saw a way to survive and you were full of joy." I'd survived and I was full of joy, but I was also worried that this was the dream I would need to be reminded of: traveling in the summer, falling in love, deciding I didn't want to kill myself, realizing I wasn't entitled to happiness, finding it anyway. And then, I was in Saint-Léon.

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After we came back from the farm, I asked Serge how to slaughter a cow. He playacted it for me in the living room. "*Assommer,*" he declared from his recliner. He held up an imaginary axe, flipped it over and pointed to the blunt end. "Hit it in the forehead until it's unconscious." Louis-

Étienne had used a gun to shoot cows in the temple, but Serge was afraid of shooting himself, so he used an axe instead. Next, Lucille handed him a butter knife. He pulled it across his neck, bunching up his skin. “Slit the throat to let out the blood.” He flicked his hands under his chin to show the blood spurting out. Then he made a big rotational gesture with his arms. I got out of my recliner and lay on the floor. “Flip it on its back.” He kneeled down and ran the knife along my sternum. “Cut through the skin and bones to pull out the guts.” He pulled me up with one hand as he mimed hoisting a rope with the other. “Hang it by its hind legs and skin it.” He pretended to shear my arms with the knife. He hoisted me a bit higher and put the blade on the nape of my neck. “Decapitate.” He ran it down my spine. “Cut it in half.”

That was it. Louis-Étienne would back a pickup truck onto the slaughtering platform to collect the vitals, head, feet, and bones. Serge and Lucille turned back to the T.V. They were watching an American film dubbed in French. I couldn’t follow what was happening, but they kept lurching forward and gasping, as emotional as I’d ever seen them.

Researching the suicides didn’t make me more suicidal. I felt like my mother with her murder shows: captivated by the violence but emotionally detached. Serge was just as clinical, visiting his family’s graves, reenacting slaughter, resurrecting Saint-Léon. When you are suicidal for a long time, your capacity for other emotions atrophies. You become desensitized to loss. Because what is suicide if not one long and unrelenting loss: of innocence, of emotion, of beauty, of time, of will. And for my family: of life, of faith, of memory. And so I have come to see Saint-Léon — that remote, almost mythological village, at once dying and timeless — as the locus of some great, generational, cataclysmic loss: a life-sucking gyre from which we will never escape, more primordial than a curse, more elemental, and at the center of it, that massive slaughterhouse, that church of almost-suicide, where Arthur nearly hanged himself and Louis-Étienne thought about shooting himself and Serge was afraid to shoot himself and I made my suicidal pilgrimage. It is that

cavernous, pitch-black inside all of us, the vanishing point for all we have lost, and soon it will collapse in on itself: Serge will die and it will be as if we never lived in Saint-Léon.

I wondered if he was still suicidal. Lucille told me he had recently overcome a years-long bout of "insomnia." He had tried sleeping pills, exercise, but nothing worked. Then, in 2017, the ghost of the Virgin Mary appeared at a shrine forty-five minutes south of Saint-Léon. In the 1980's, the Gisèle family of Saint-Frédéric had bought a plot of land from a man who swore it would one day become a pilgrimage site. Sure enough, one morning in 1989, they saw their statue of Mary quiver. A month later, the Saint-Frédéric priest asked Mary to confirm that she had come. The next day, water flowed from the village fountain for the first time in months. Word spread, and ever since, thousands of people from around the world have flocked to the remote parish to pray to the Virgin and be healed. One man recovered from cancer. Another's eczema was cured overnight. Another came wanting to kill himself and left not wanting to kill himself. Over the years, there have been more Marian apparitions and more miracles. One morning, the Gisèle family woke up to find nine hearts mowed into the hill behind the shrine. The hearts were so perfect, they insisted, they must have been mowed by God.

After the 2017 sighting, Serge and Lucille visited Saint-Frédéric. A week later, someone finally bought my grandmother's home. My cousin Carl got a new job with a shorter commute and felt less depressed. Serge started sleeping again. He and Lucille have been devotees of the site ever since. A couple days before I left Saint-Léon, I went with them to a "Miracle Mass" celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the first apparition. Mignonne raced ahead while Serge and I walked Lucille arm-in-arm down the steep gravel road to the site. At the bottom, we found Mignonne lapping from the holy fountain: a two-foot-long PVC pipe sticking out of a retaining wall with a blue, plastic reservoir beneath the spout. The pipe was flanked with small statues of Mary encased in cairns and stones painted with white messages: "This water is blessed." "Glorify, praise, sing. I salute you, Mary." Bottles of holy water were available for a small donation.

Past the fountain was the shrine: a manicured hill topped by a colorful statue of Mary and a HOLLYWOOD-esque sign reading JE VOUS SALUE MARIE MERE DE LA TENDRESSE — "I salute you Marie Mother of Tenderness" — in foot-high white letters. A placard at the base asked visitors to "pray for world peace, for those who have not yet recognized God and the Virgin Mary, and for those who have and will come to this site in the hopes of receiving an answer to their prayers…During your visit, we will benefit from hearing your beautiful story of love, in all its highs and lows. It's a true treasure for us. Our only wish is that you will be able to find some peaceful moments in a suitable place, at a time when one really needs it. And to reassure you, the clergy supports this grand project of God!"

Opposite the shrine was the Rivière des Fermes, lined with trailers where members of the Gisèle family lived during the site's busy summer months. They had set up a wedding tent in case it rained, but it was beautiful out, the sun haloing all the trees. Serge, Lucille, and I tried to sit down in the first row of folding chairs, but someone complained I was too tall, so I moved to the back. I'd been counting on Serge and Lucille to narrate the ceremony to me in slower, simpler French, but the speakers were so emotive, I was able to follow along. A priest in a satiny white cassock gave a soft-spoken sermon praising the Gisèles. Then, people got up to talk about how they'd miraculously recovered after visiting the site. Some of them cried. The crowd listened silently to each testimonial before bursting into applause.

After communion, we all wrote down things we wanted healed on slips of paper. We tossed them into a pyre and set it on fire, watching the black smoke curl up towards God as we sang a hymn written for the occasion: "Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah Jesus my joy. Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah Jesus my king. We light this fire of joy to burn what makes us unhappy, to reduce our wounds to ashes, to send them up to the sky. We all sing next to this fire, this fire of joy. We are reborn, oh Lord our God, and together share this joy, this joy of Mother Mary that

accompanies us at every moment. We will do everything she says to render us in her grace at all times."

On the drive back to Saint-Léon, Serge and Lucille were jubilant, crooning along to the radio, pulling Mignonne up on her hind legs for a slow dance. I asked them to recap their theology, so they turned off the radio and explained: They believe in God. They believe God is good. They owe everything to Him. They are so grateful for Him. They also believe in the curse. They don't believe the curse undermines the goodness of God, because Verreault, not God, put the curse on the Nadeaus. They believe anyone can invoke *malédictions*, not just priests. By the same token, they believe anyone can invoke *bénédictions*, or blessings, to counteract the *malédictions* that spite us. And so, every night since the 2017 sighting, they have kneeled at the foot of their bed and asked God to protect each member of their family. "Marie-Jeanne, Carl, Cathie, Tom, Henri, Elliot," they incant together. They see me only once or twice a year. We don't speak the same language. They hardly know what's going on in my life, yet they pray for me every day of theirs.