

## *Donatien Moisdon*

### **Flesh and Blood**

#### Part I

Wind and snow keep hurling themselves at Lake Huron, more specifically Georgian Bay, then on to the frozen black boulders of the shore, then through a curtain of tormented birch trees, all the way to the decrepit service station where I have stopped for gas. People say that the lakeshore is very picturesque

around here. I'll take their word for it.

I have taken refuge in the shabby café of the service station. Behind the counter, and stuck to the wall, there is a big round clock, but it is already so dark outside, and the dial is so encrusted with dirt that I can hardly read the time. Next to it I can make out a Massey-Ferguson perpetual calendar showing a pretty girl sitting on the hood of a tractor and biting an apple. The date : February 16. I ask :

“February 16 of what year ?”

They laugh around me. The young policeman who was having a coffee at the counter swallows the wrong way. His face turns bright red. “What's the matter with you ?” He coughs. “Do you think we are still in 1948 ? You don't look as if you've been drinking.”

“1949 then ?”

“Of course, what else ?”

So, that's what 1949 looks like ! I keep looking around me like a tourist who would mumble : So,

that's what the Statue of Liberty looks like ! Indeed, the yellowish light of the naked 60-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling, the car I just left by the gas pump and the way I am dressed in a vast black coat reaching almost to my ankles, everything fits in with 1949.

I brush the snow off my shoulders, remove my chapka and my scarf and put them on one of the pinewood tables stained by the memories of thousands of cheap meals.

“A coffee ?” says the owner of the greasy spoon while waving an empty cup in my direction. I shake my head to agree. The wind is howling. People can barely hear each other talk. Some gusts of wind are so strong that they make you feel as if the whole creaky building has been lifted off the ground and slammed back to earth. The electric bulb starts to flicker, then dies.

Resigned, the owner reaches for half a dozen candles under the

cash register and aligns them on the counter. He is obviously used to power cuts. He lights one of the candles with a match then all the others with that first one, while making sure that they are secure on a pool of melted wax.

His son, who is looking after my car, has taken a powerful torch with him. I can see its light going up and down behind near-horizontal streaks of snow. As the boy keeps pumping, I imagine the pale-yellow liquid going up its glass cylinder in a sleeve of

bubbles. When the gasoline gets to the top, a valve clicks shut, another one opens, gravity sends one gallon to the tank of my car and the young man starts working on the next gallon. I cannot help being amazed at the fact that this complex mechanical instrument keeps working in such temperatures and in such weather.

My daydreaming is interrupted by that same boy trying unsuccessfully to open the door. I help from my side. All the

candles go off, permeating the room with a fragrance of ecclesiastical nostalgia. The young man comes in, letting the door slam behind him. Huffing and sniffing, he takes a few unsteady steps, as if he was drunk. He sniffs again and, out of breath, manages to mumble : “It will be \$2.70 please.”

I explore the pockets of my coat, my fingers brushing, as I do, over the enormous Colt-45 resting in its holster. I look sideways at the policeman. He is

sipping his cup of coffee and certainly does not suspect that his reputation would be well established and his career well on the way if he arrested me. On the other hand, if he does nothing, he stands a better chance of enjoying his retirement.

A sudden scary thought : have I got any money on me ? With a sigh of relief, I find a wallet, and in the wallet a decent amount of money. Normally, I don't like the idea of tipping : it attracts

attention. However, the boy's red nose and ice-lined eyebrows move me to give him three dollars. "Keep the change". I also think it is time to pay for my coffee.

Father and son thank me profusely and urge me to spend the night on one of the café's bench seats. In such a storm, they think, I am sure to slide off the road. I reassure them : "I'll be fine."

I grab my scarf, my Russian Ushanka hat and my gloves. Like

a boxer before a fight, and in order to brave the fury of Nature I breathe deeply several times. The young man helps me open the door. The cop gives a little wave. I dive towards my car. I can barely hear the door slamming behind me.

But what's going on over there ? I can vaguely make out two human shapes swaying by the toolshed. I think I know who they are and what they have come here for.

I tear off my gloves, unbutton the

top of my coat and frantically try to reach my gun. They do the same. Only their lack of foresight will mean that I am still alive. Rigid in our thick coats, fighting off scarfs, jackets and other impediments, we hardly offer the spectacle of the classic, I might almost say elegant way that gangsters usually settle their differences.

I have a great advantage over them : I have just come out of a well-heated room. My hands are still supple. Finally, I can feel the

revolver. I pull it out and instinctively remove the safety catch. I fall on my knees, and grabbing the weapon with both hands, fire twice on each indistinct shape. They crumble slowly, like two oversized bowling pins.

I can't tell if my 'colleagues' are really dead, but it doesn't matter : if they are not, the intense cold will swiftly do the job. No one came out of the café. No one heard anything.

I start being aware of an icy

cataplasm against my knees and shins. My right hand, still gripping the revolver cross, is getting stiff with cold and starts hurting like hell. Even so, I am so disoriented by what just happened that it takes several seconds before I manage to stand up.

I do get up, painfully, like an old man. Still holding the Colt, I carefully shuffle towards the men. Only one of them has had time to take out his pistol. I know him all too well. He has tried to

kill me before. They call him The Greek, not because of his nationality but because he is rumored to ejaculate in his pants every time he kills a man. He had an ivory cross with gold initials especially crafted for his Husqvarna V35. I kick it out of the way in case he regains consciousness.

At that moment, I can spot two weak red lights on the road. A car, that I had not seen at all, disappears in the blizzard. Either the driver did not have the guts

to face me or more likely he had been given very strict instructions : whatever happens, get back to base and report.

As I try to collect my thoughts, it occurs to me that the tool shed could offer a solution. I go over and push the door. It opens easily at first but jams halfway in. I enter. Once sheltered from the wind, and even though it is certainly just as cold here as it is outside, I experience an odd feeling of warmth. My heart is still beating wildly. Slowly,

painfully, I place the revolver on what I take to be some sort of workbench. I slip my hand under my jacket for warmth. God knows what happened to the gloves ! I close my eyes, breathe deeply and allow myself a couple of minutes before doing anything else.

My fingers become supple again. Through the material of my pocket, inside the jacket, I can feel something hard. I take it out : it's a cigarette lighter, an S.T. Dupont, no less. A little voice

in my brain tells me that I paid \$80 for it at Tiffany's. I didn't know I smoked ! Yet there are no cigars or cigarettes on my coat or in my jacket. Maybe I just use it to help languid young ladies in need of a smoke. I try the lighter. It works perfectly of course. Its gas-fed flame is as bright as a flashlight, if not directional. I place it in a nook that's well protected from the wind.

I look around me. No one will come in here for a while. Crates, jerrycans, old tires, planks, car

spare parts, tool boxes... who would ever need them in Winter ? Besides, the whole lot is already dusted with a fine layer of powder snow penetrating through the cracks of the shed.

I come out and pull my first killer by the feet until I can drop him next to some crates. His body is still supple. It leaves behind a wide smear of blood that the wind erases angrily. A second trip takes care of the Greek. I throw his pistol next to him and proceed to cover the bodies with

wooden boards, and other bric-à-brac including some old tires and a rigid raincoat that had been hanging behind the door. With a bit of luck, those two degenerates will not be found before Spring.

On the whole, I am rather pleased with the turn of events. I even catch myself humming a little tune. I switch off the cigarette lighter and retrieve my own gun. Instead of sliding it back in its holster, I keep it in my hand, just in case. I come out of

the toolshed. Once more, I find myself in the snow storm.

Blinded by a powerful flashlight, I raise my forearm to protect my eyes, the arm holding the gun... and it's like someone punched my side with a red-hot iron.

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I am on my back, trying very hard not to yell with pain. My forehead is being wiped gently with a washcloth. "You are in the recovery room Sir, the operation was a complete success."

I moan... ah, yes, I remember now : a kidney operation. I am in Peterborough hospital and we are not at all in 1949. We are in 1974. Nor are we in February. This is September. What a nightmare... and so realistic, as well ! Better look at the funny side.

I remember everything now : the operating theater where I was wheeled in on a strange aluminum frame shaped like an inverted "Y", and on which I was strapped, legs wide open, as if

for a human sacrifice. I felt that contraption rotating forward until I was at a 45 degree angle in front of my greenish-clad executioners. Between their masks and their caps, I can only see their eyes void of all expression. The surgeon and I have been friends for years. We play bridge once a week. “What’s your name ?” He asked.

I could not believe my ears but he went on : “Don’t get cross with me. I’m just checking that you’ve got all your wits about.

So, humor me : what's your name ?" I grudgingly complied.

"Where were you born ?"

"Port Hope, Ontario."

"Date of birth ?"

"16 February 1949."

He turned towards the anesthetist : "OK, Jenny, hit the juice."

I was expecting the traditional chloroform facemask as seen in countless movies, but I was just given a shot. They told me to count to ten. I managed to go as far as three...

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The nurse is patting my hand. “I must go now, but I’ll be back to check on you every hour or so. Be good !”

## Part II

It is a beautiful day : clear blue skies, no wind. The Hammonds have just left. They brought me flowers. What a lovely old couple ! They own a farm in Parry Sound, next to Horseshoe Lake. They would like me to go there when I feel better, which is not for at least two more weeks. It is not a real farm, of course, even if it used to be. Now, it is a holiday residence. I could not refuse their

invitation : it will be ideal for convalescence.

Tom Hammond retired some ten years ago. He was a policeman and had reached a fairly high position. He has a quick mind. His bridge-playing tactics are both daring and unpredictable. I am looking forward to meeting with him again. I picture myself on a deckchair, under a tree, while looking at Tanglefoot, his dog, shaking himself dry after a swim in the lake. I dream of lazy, lengthy lunches around a

barbecue.

October is the best time of year for this sort of visit. All is calm, yet alive. The kids are back in school, mosquitoes and midges are dead.

Altos of red, vibrant sopranos of gold, overwhelm your senses and lead you to a world of dreams. Long cliffs of purple maple trees roar by the gray-blue ribbons of deserted highways. Wild fires of intense yellow explode amongst thickets of dark green pine trees or slowly fade between them like

dying embers.

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Tom Hammond is talking to me about his youth. “I was born only a couple of miles from here, right on the shores of Georgian Bay. Shall we go and have a look ?” I love the old farm but I jumped at the chance to go for a drive. We go south on Highway 400 and a few minutes later, turn right on a dirt road. Tom drives slowly : the road is bumpy. He stops in some sort of wasteland surrounded by

rachitic vegetation. As soon as he turns off the engine, I can hear the breathless whisper of wavelets behind a curtain of yellow birch trees.

We leave the car. The ground is sandy. Here and there we can see concrete foundations of houses. Broken tiles, rotten timber, blackened planks and rusty remains of domestic life pile up in the middle of these houses. Grass, bramble and even scrawny bushes are pushing through the debris.

A ghost town ! A real one ! Or, at least a ghost hamlet. Unlike the romantic notion I had of such abandoned tenements, there are no structures still standing with their squeaky doors and windows : Mother Nature is far too harsh around here. I can't help asking : "Were you really born here ?"

He smiles, proud to be one of the last representatives of a bygone age. He points at a barely visible cemented square covered with whirls of dust : "Yeah, right here. My father had a few acres of

land... if you can call it land ! This is a very harsh part of the world, you know. All the farmers have left or have died trying to keep going.” He turns towards the dirt road. “And that, believe it or not, was the main highway before they built the 400. Going from Sudbury to Toronto was a 24-hour journey.”

We start walking slowly along the old highway. We soon reach what remains of a service-station. A twisted and rusty gas pump is still standing on its cement

support like a modern sculpture or a grotesque accusation. Behind the pump looms yet another pile of debris dotted with thistles and stinging nettle.

Dreamily, Tom loses himself in the contemplation of these ruins. “My wife would say that I ramble on a bit, because I’ve told that story so many times, but something happened here. It marked the start of my career as a policeman. I was 18, very enthusiastic and totally inexperienced. I got here one

Friday afternoon. It was already dark. The weather was atrocious. There was a café over there. I was having a hot drink at the counter when someone else arrived. He was well dressed, looked like a nice fellow... and yet, I killed him. Yes sir, I killed him. He left the café before me, and when I came out, there he was, a handgun pointing at me.”  
I can feel myself turning pale and weak, and I must lean against the remnants of the gas pump. Tom has not noticed and carries

on enthusiastically. He is now reliving the scene and playing both cops and robbers while shouting *bang, bang* like a kid.

Through clenched teeth I ask :  
“Who was this guy ?”

“Emilio Modina, public enemy number one in the States. We all thought he was hiding somewhere in California when all this time he was right here, in Ontario. I owe him a lot, you know. I became famous from one day to the next, and during the next few years, got promoted

several times. Isn't life weird when you think about it ?”

Weird is an understatement. Sweating, out of breath, I cling to the pump. Tom finally notices my discomfort. He rushed towards me : “Oh dear ! I am so sorry ! I should not have dragged you all this way. Don't move : I'll get the car.”

I fall on my knees. At the hospital they told me that there was no reason why I should ever feel any pain from the operation again. Well, they were wrong ! Tom's car

rushes in and stops in a cloud of dust. He helps me in. The pain becomes less intense.

I'm taking you straight to the doctor's." He says as we are jolt back to Highway 400. I ask : "When exactly did all this happen ?"

"Don't worry about that. Doctor first."

"No, honestly, the pain is going away. It will keep my mind away from it all."

Well, in that case, it was on February 16, 1949. How could I

forget ?”

“Did Emilio actually shoot at you ?”

“Now that’s something I always found puzzling : the wind was howling so loud that I didn’t hear any shots. I could have sworn he hadn’t had time to pull the trigger, but when we got his weapon, it became obvious that he had just used it. There were four rounds missing. We even found their cases. Gusts of wind had rolled them all the way to my feet. Some weather !”

Yes, I reflect, but I also know that the wind was blowing from the lake, which means that the full metal jacquets should have rolled away from Tom, not towards him. Profoundly disturbed, I cannot help asking : “Were other bodies ever found in the Spring ?”

“Bodies ? What bodies ? Emilio’s was the only body we recovered.”

“Didn’t you check the toolshed ?”  
I can see him stiffen : “How did you know there was a tool shed ? You were not even born.”

“16th of February 1949 ? I was born all right, but I only a few hours’ old. That’s my birthday ! Besides, all service stations have tool sheds, don’t they ?”

“The service station, the café, the toolshed, everything collapsed in the early hours of the morning. No one was hurt, but the owner and his son went down to Toronto to find work.”

“Never came back later to fetch a few things ?”

“They took what little money there was in the cash register.

They didn't bother with anything else."

We finally reach Highway 400. Tom speeds up. "Damn it !" He grunts, "Could it be that Emilio did not try to kill me after all ?"

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Fifteen minutes later, the Hammonds's family doctor shrugs : "Must have been just a pinched nerve. You are perfectly all right."

We arrive back at the farm. Evelyn Hammond opens the passenger door. "My poor Emilio,

you are as white as a sheet.  
Looks as if you've seen a ghost."

"You are not far off."

"Take him to the living room and  
give him a stiff drink," says Tom.

"I'll be going to the police station  
and gather up a forensic team."