she drove on, she asked Theo if he could suggest suitable French for a few English expressions: "divided attention" and "hard-driven" and "matchless perfection," the latter in one word.

"I hope no one steals my Alpine beret," he said. "I left it hanging on the cat."

Those were the last words they exchanged today. It is how they said good-bye.

AFTERWORD

ABOUT THE STORIES

SAMUEL BECKETT, answering a hopeless question from a Paris newspaper—"Why do you write?"—said it was all he was good for: *"Bon qu'a ça."* Georges Bernanos said that writing was like rowing a boat out to sea: The shoreline disappears, it is too late to turn back, and the rower becomes a galley slave. When Colette was seventy-five and crippled with arthritis she said that now, at last, she could write anything she wanted without having to count on what it would bring in. Marguerite Yourcenar said that if she had inherited the estate left by her mother and then gambled away by her father, she might never have written another word. Jean-Paul Sartre said that writing is an end in itself. (I was twenty-two and working on a newspaper in Montreal when I interviewed him. I had not asked him the *why* of the matter but the *what.*) The Polish poet Aleksander Wat told me that it was like the story of the camel and the Bedouin; in the end, the camel takes over. So that was the writing life: an insistent camel.

I have been writing or just thinking about things to write since I was a child. I invented rhymes and stories when I could not get to sleep and in the morning when I was told it was too early to get up, and I uttered dialogue for a large colony of paper dolls. Once, I was astonished to hear my mother say, "Oh, she talks to herself all the time." I had not realized that that kind of speech could be overheard, and, of course, I was not talking but supplying a voice. If I pin it down as an adult calling, I have lived in writing, like a spoonful of water in a river, for more than forty-five years. (If I add the six years I spent on a weekly newspaper—*The Standard*, dead and buried now—it comes to more than fifty. At that time, at home, I was steadily filling an old picnic hamper with notebooks and manuscripts. The distinction between journalism and fiction is the difference between without and within. Journalism recounts as exactly and economically as possible the weather in the street; fiction takes no notice of that particular weather but brings to life a distillation of all weathers, a climate of the mind. Which is not to say it need not be exact and economical: It is precision of a different order.)

I still do not know what impels anyone sound of mind to leave dry land and spend a lifetime describing people who do not exist. If it is child's play, an extension of make-believe—something one is frequently assured by persons who write about writing—how to account for the overriding wish to do that, just that, only that, and consider it as rational an occupation as riding a racing bike over the Alps? Perhaps the cultural attaché at a Canadian embassy who said to me "Yes, but what do you really do?" was expressing an adult opinion. Perhaps a writer is, in fact, a child in disguise, with a child's lucid view of grown-ups, accurate as to atmosphere, improvising when it tries to make sense of adult behavior. Peter Quennell, imagining Shakespeare, which means imagining the inexplicable, says that Shakespeare heard the secret summons and was sent along his proper path. The secret summons, the proper path, are what saints and geniuses hold in common. So do great writers, the semi-great, the good, the lesser, the dogged, the trudgers, and the merely anxious. All will discover that Paradise (everybody's future) is crisscrossed with hedges. Looking across a hedge to the green place where genius is consigned, we shall see them assembled, waiting to receive a collective reward if only they will agree on the source of the summons and the start of the proper path. The choir of voices floating back above the hedge probably will be singing, "*Bon qu'a ça,*" for want of knowing.

Janet Flanner, a great journalist of the age, the *New Yorker* correspondent in Paris for half a century, when on the brink of her eighties said she would rather have been a writer of fiction. The need to make a living, the common lot, had kept her from leaving something she did brilliantly and setting off for, perhaps, nowhere. She had published fiction, but not much and not satisfactorily. Now she believed her desire to write had been greater than her talent. Something was missing. My father, who was younger than Janet Flanner and who died in his early thirties, never thought of himself as anything but a painter. It may have been just as well—for him—that he did not go on to discover that he could never have been more than a dedicated amateur. He did not try and fail: In a sense, he never started out, except along the path of some firm ideal concerning life and art. The ideality required displacement; he went from England to Canada. His friends would recall him as levelheaded. No one ever heard him say that he had hoped for this or regretted that. His persona as an artist was so matter-of-fact, so taken for granted, so fully accepted by other people, that it was years until I understood what should have been obvious: He also had worked and gone to an office, before he became too ill to work at anything.

"What did you imagine you lived on?" said the family friend who had just let me know that my father was, after all, like most other people. He was with a firm that imported massive office furnishings of heavy wood and employed Englishmen.

Not every business wanted Englishmen. They had a reputation for criticizing Canada and failing to pull their weight. Quite often they just filled posts where they could do no real harm or they held generic job titles. It created a small inflation of inspectors, controllers, estimators, managers, assistants, counselors, and vice-presidents. Some hung on to a military rank from the First World War and went about as captains and majors. This minor imperial sham survived into the 1930s, when the Depression caved in on jobs and pseudo-jobs alike.

At eighteen I went to look at the office building, which was a gray stone house on Beaver Hall Hill. I remembered having been taken there, wearing my convent school uniform of black serge with a clerical collar, and being introduced to a man with an English accent. My father was inclined to show me off, and I was used to it. What I had retained of the visit (or so it came back) was a glowing lampshade made of green glass and a polished desk of some dark wood and a shadowy room, a winter room. It was on Beaver Hall Hill, around the same time, that another stranger stopped me in the street because I looked so startlingly like my late father. The possibility of a grown daughter cannot have been uppermost: I had vanished from Montreal at ten and come back on my own. The legal age for making such decisions was twenty-one: I had made it at eighteen and hoped no one would notice. A few people in Montreal believed I had died. It was a rumor, a floating story with no setting or plot, and it had ceased to affect anyone, by now, except for a family of French Canadians who had been offering prayers every year on my birthday.

Years later, in a town called Châteauguay, I would hear a trailing echo of the report. We had spent summers there and, once, two whole winters. The paralyzing winter wind blowing from the Châteauguay River was supposed to be restorative for the frail. My mother, who never had a cold, breathed it in and said, sincerely, "Isn't it glorious!" I came back to Châteauguay fifty years after taking the Montreal train for the last time, across the bridge, over the river. I came with a television crew from Toronto. We were looking at places where I had been as a child. At one address in Montreal we had found a bank. My first school had become a vacant lot. The small building where I had rented my first independent apartment, installed my own furniture, filled shelves with books and political pamphlets (as many as possible of them banned in Quebec), hung pictures, bought inch by inch from Montreal painters, then a flourishing school, was now a students' residence, run-down, sagging, neglected. I would never have returned alone to Châteauguay. It was the last place where we had lived as a family. When my father died, I was told he had gone to England and would be back before long, and I had believed it. A television unit is composed of strangers, largely indifferent, intent on getting the assignment over and a flight home. Their indifference was what I needed: a thick glass wall against the effects of memory.

I drew a map of the place—town, river, bridge, railway station, Catholic church, Anglican church, Protestant school, houses along a road facing the river, even candy store—and gave it to the producer. Everything was exact, except perhaps the Protestant school, which we forgot to look for. I saw the remembered house, still standing, though greatly altered. The candy store had been turned into a ramshackle coffee shop with a couple of pool tables, the Duranseau farm replaced by a sign, RUE DURANSEAU, indicating not much of a street. I recognized Dundee Cottage, now called something else, and Villa Crépina, where the Crépin boys had lived. They threw stones at other people's dogs, especially English dogs. Their low evergreen hedge along the sidewalk still put out red berries. I had once been warned not to touch the leaves or berries, said to be poisonous. I ate only small quantities of leaves, and nothing happened. They tasted like strong tea, also forbidden, and desirable on that account. There was a fairy-tale look of danger about the berries. One could easily imagine long fairy-tale sleep.

At the café I spoke to some men sitting huddled at a counter. The place had gone silent when we came in speaking English. I asked if anyone had ever heard of families I remembered—the Duranseaus, whose children I had played with, or the tenants of Dundee Cottage, whose name suddenly returned and has again dissolved, or another elderly neighbor—elderly in recollection, perhaps not even forty—who complained to my mother when I said "bugger" and complained again when I addressed him, quite cheerfully, as "old cock." I had no idea what any of it meant. None of the men at the counter looked my way. Their hunched backs spoke the language of small-town distrust. Finally, a younger man said he was a relation of the Crépins. He must have been born a whole generation after the time when I picked a poisoned leaf whenever I went by his great-uncle's hedge. He knew about our house, so radically modified now, because of some child, a girl, who had lived there a long time before and been drowned in the river. He gave me his great-aunt's telephone number, saying she knew about every house and stone and tree and vanished person. I never called. There was nothing to ask. Another English Canadian family with just one child had lived on the same side of the river. They had a much larger house, with a stone wall around it, and the drowned child was a boy. The Protestant school was named after him.

The fear that I had inherited a flawed legacy, a vocation without the competence to sustain it, haunted me from early youth. It was the reason why I tore up more than I saved, why I was slow to show my work except to one or two friends—and then not often. When I was twenty-one, someone to whom I had given two stories, just to read, handed them to a local literary review, and I was able to see what a story looked like surrounded by poetry and other fiction. I sent another story to a radio station. They paid me something and read it over the air, and I discovered what my own work could sound like in a different voice. After that I went on writing, without attempting to have anything published or asking for an opinion, for another six years. By then I was twenty-seven and becoming exactly what I did not want to be: a journalist who wrote fiction along some margin of spare time. I thought the question of writing or stopping altogether had to be decided before thirty. The only solution seemed to be a clean break and a try: I would give it two years. What I was to live on during the two years does not seem to have troubled me. Looking back, I think my entire concentration was fixed on setting off. No city in the world drew me as strongly as Paris. (When I am asked why, I am unable to say.) It was a place where I had no friends, no connections, no possibility of finding employment should it be necessary—although, as I reasoned things, if I was to go there with a job and salary in mind, I might as well stay where I was—and where I might run out of money. That I might not survive at all, that I might have to be rescued from deep water and ignominiously shipped home, never entered my head. I believed that if I was to call myself a writer, I should live on writing. If I could not live on it, even simply, I should destroy every scrap, every trace, every notebook, and live some other way. Whatever happened, I would not enter my thirties as a journalist—or an anything else—with stories piling up in a picnic hamper. I decided to send three of my stories to *The New Yorker*, one after the other. One acceptance would be good enough. If all three were refused, I would take it as decisive. But then I did something that seems contradictory and odd: A few days before I put the first story in the mail (I was having all the trouble in the world measuring if it was all right or rubbish), I told the newspaper's managing editor I intended to quit. I think I was afraid of having a failure of nerve. Not long before, the newspaper had started a pension plan, and I had asked if I could keep out of it. I had worked in an office where I had watched people shuffle along to retirement time, and the sight had scared me. The managing editor thought I was dissatisfied about something. He sent me to someone else, who was supposed to find out what it was. In the second office, I was told I was out of my mind; it was no use training women, they always leave; one day I would come creeping back, begging for my old job; all reporters think they can write; I had the audacity to call myself a writer when I was like an architect who had never designed a house. I went back to my desk, typed a formal resignation, signed it, and turned it in.

The first story came back from *The New Yorker* with a friendly letter that said, "Do you have anything else you could show us?" The second story was taken. The third I didn't like anymore. I tore it up and sent the last of the three from Paris.

Newspaper work was my apprenticeship. I never saw it as a drag or a bind or a waste of time. I had no experience and would never have been taken on if there had been a man available. It was still very much a man's profession. I overheard an editor say, "If it hadn't been for the goddamned war, we wouldn't have hired even one of the goddamned women." The appalling labor laws of Quebec made it easy for newspapers to ban unions. I received half the salary paid to men and I had to hear, frequently and not only from men, that I had "a good job, for a girl." Apparently, by holding on to it I was standing in the way of any number of qualified men, each with a wife and three children to support. That was the accepted view of any young female journalist, unless she was writing about hemlines or three-fruit jam.

My method of getting something on paper was the same as for the fiction I wrote at home: I could not move on to the second sentence until the first sounded true. True to what? Some arrangement in my head, I suppose. I wrote by hand, in pencil, made multitudinous changes, erased, filled in, typed a clean page, corrected, typed. An advantage to early practice of journalism is said to be that it teaches one how to write fast. Whatever I acquired did not include a measure of speed. I was always on the edge of a deadline, and even on the wrong side. Thinking back on my outrageous slowness, I don't know why I wasn't fired a dozen times. Or, rather, perhaps I do: I could write intelligible English, I was cheaper by half than a man, and I seemed to have an unending supply of ideas for feature stories and interviews, or picture stories to work on with a photographer. It was the era of photo features. I liked inventing them. They were something like miniature scripts; I always saw the pictures as stills from a film. I knew Quebec to the core, and not just the English-speaking enclaves of Montreal. I could interview French Canadians without dragging them into English, a terrain of wariness and ill will. I suggested stories on subjects I wanted to know more about and places I wanted to see and people I was curious to meet. Only a few were turned down, usually because they scraped against political power or the sensibilities of advertisers. I wrote feature stories from the beginning; was an occasional critic, until I gave a film an impertinent review and a string of theatres canceled a number of ads; wrote a weekly column, until the head of an agency protested about a short item that poked fun at a radio commercial, at which point the column was dropped. All this is a minor part of the social history of an era, in a region of North America at a political standstill.

I managed to carve out an astonishing amount of autonomy, saved myself from writing on the sappy subjects usually reserved for women, and was not sacked—not even when someone wrote to protest about "that Marxist enfant terrible." (It was not a safe time or place for such accusations.) My salary was modest, but whole families were living on less. I had amassed an enormous mental catalog of places and people, information that still seeps into my stories. Journalism was a life I liked, but not the one I wanted. An American friend has told me that when we were fifteen I said I intended to write and live in Paris. I have no recollection of the conversation, but she is not one to invent anecdotes based on hindsight. It is about all I have in the way of a blueprint. The rest is memory and undisputed evidence.

The impulse to write and the stubbornness needed to keep going are supposed to come out of some drastic shaking up, early in life.

There is even a term for it: the shock of change. Probably, it means a jolt that unbolts the door between perception and imagination and leaves it ajar for life, or that fuses memory and language and waking dreams. Some writers may just simply come into the world with overlapping vision of things seen and things as they might be seen. All have a gift for holding their breath while going on breathing: It is the basic requirement. If shock and change account for the rest of it, millions of men and women, hit hard and steadily, would do nothing but write; in fact, most of them don't. No childhood is immunized against disturbance. A tremor occurs underfoot when a trusted adult says one thing and means another. It brings on the universal and unanswerable wail "It's not fair!"—to which the shabby rejoinder that life isn't does nothing to restore order.

I took it for granted that life was tough for children and that adults had a good time. My parents enjoyed themselves, or seemed to. If I want to bring back a Saturday night in full summer, couples dancing on the front gallery (Quebec English for veranda), a wind-up gramophone and a stack of brittle records, all I need to hear is the beginning of "West End Blues." The dancers are down from Montreal or up from the States, where there is Prohibition. Prohibition would be out of the question in Quebec, although the rest of Canada enjoys being rather dry. I mention it just to say that there is no such thing as a Canadian childhood. One's beginnings are regional. Mine are wholly Quebec, English and Protestant, yes, but with a strong current of French and Catholic. My young parents sent me off on that current by placing me in a French convent school, for reasons never made plain. I remember my grandmother's saying, "Well, I give up." It was a singular thing to do and in those days unheard of. It left me with two systems of behavior, divided by syntax and tradition; two environments to consider, one becalmed in a long twilight of nineteenth-century religiosity; two codes of social behavior; much practical experience of the difference between a rule and a moral point.

Somewhere in this duality may be the exact point of the beginning of writing. All I am certain of is that the fragile root, the tentative yes or no, was made safe by reading. I cannot recall a time when I couldn't read; I do remember being read to and wanting to take the book and decipher it for myself. A friend of my parents recalled seeing my father trying to teach me the alphabet as I sat in a high chair. He held the book flat on a tray—any book, perhaps a novel, pulled off a shelf—and pointed out the capital letters. At a young age, apparently, I could translate at sight, English to French, reading aloud without stumbling. I was in no other way precocious: For years I would trail far behind other children in grasping simple sums or telling the time (I read the needles in reverse, five o'clock for seven) or separating left from right. I thought the eldest child in a family had been born last. At seven, I wondered why no one ever married some amiable dog. When my mother explained, I remained unenlightened. (The question possibly arose from my devoted reading of an English comic strip for children, *Pip and Squeak*, in which a dog and a penguin seem to be the parents of a rabbit named Wilfred.) I did not know there was a particular bodily difference between boys and girls until I was eight; I had thought it a matter of clothes, haircuts, and general temperament. At nine, I still looked for mermaids in the Châteauguay River. My father had painted for me a screen that showed mermaids, with long red hair, rising out of green waves. I had not yet seen an ocean, just lakes and rivers. The river across the road froze white in winter and thawed to a shade of clear golden brown. Apart from the error as to color, it seemed unlikely he would paint something untrue.

Four weeks after my fourth birthday, when I was enrolled as a boarder in my first school, run by a semi-cloistered order of teaching and missionary nuns, I brought, along with my new, strange, stiff, uncomfortable and un-English uniform and severely buttoned underclothes, some English storybooks from home. (I owned a few books in French, the gift of a doctor, a French Canadian specialist, who had attended me for a mastoid infection after scarlet fever and become a close friend of my parents. I was far too young to understand them. They were moral tales for older children, and even years later I would find them heavy going.) It was a good thing—to have books in English, that is—because I would hear and speak next to no English now, except in the summer holidays and at Christmas and Easter and on the odd weekend when I was fetched home. I always went back to school with new books,

which had to be vetted; but no one knew any English and the nun who taught it could not speak it at all, and so the illustrations were scanned for decency and the books handed back, to be stored in the small night-table next to my bed.

I owe it to children's books—picture books, storybooks, then English and American classics—that I absorbed once and for all the rhythm of English prose, the order of words in an English sentence and how they are spelled. I was eight before I was taught to write and spell English in any formal way, and what I was taught I already knew. By then, English was irremovably entrenched as the language of imagination. Nothing supposed, daydreamed, created, or invented would enter my mind by way of French. In the paper-doll era, I made up a mishmash of English, French, and the mysterious Italian syllables in recordings of bel canto, which my mother liked and often played. I called this mixture "talking Marigold." Marigold faded soon, along with paper dolls. After that, for stories and storytelling there was only one sound.

The first flash of fiction arrives without words. It consists of a fixed image, like a slide or (closer still) a freeze frame, showing characters in a simple situation. For example, Barbara, Alec, and their three children, seen getting down from a train in the south of France, announced "The Remission." The scene does not appear in the story but remains like an old snapshot or a picture in a newspaper, with a caption giving all the names. The quick arrival and departure of the silent image can be likened to the first moments of a play, before anything is said. The difference is that the characters in the frame are not seen, but envisioned, and do not have to speak to be explained. Every character comes into being with a name (which I may change), an age, a nationality, a profession, a particular voice and accent, a family background, a personal history, a destination, qualities, secrets, an attitude toward love, ambition, money, religion, and a private center of gravity.

Over the next several days I take down long passages of dialogue. Whole scenes then follow, complete in themselves but like disconnected parts of a film. I do not deliberately invent any of this: It occurs. Some writers say they actually hear the words, but

I think "hear" is meant to be in quotation marks. I do not hear anything: I know what is being said. Finally (I am describing a long and complex process as simply as I can), the story will seem to be entire, in the sense that nearly everything needed has been written. It is entire but unreadable. Nothing fits. A close analogy would be an unedited film. The first frame may have dissolved into sound and motion (Sylvie and her mother, walking arm in arm, in "Across the Bridge") or turn out to be the end (Jack and Netta in Place Masséna, in "The Moslem Wife").

Sometimes one sees immediately what needs to be done, which does not mean it can be done in a hurry: I have put aside elements of a story for months and even years. It is finished when it seems to tally with a plan I surely must have had in mind but cannot describe, or when I come to the conclusion that it cannot be written satisfactorily any other way; at least, not by me. A few times, the slow transformation from image to fiction has begun with something actually glimpsed: a young woman reading an airmail letter in the Paris Métro, early in the morning; a man in Berlin eating a plate of cold cuts, next to a lace curtain that filters gray afternoon light; an American mother, in Venice, struggling to show she is having a fine time, and her two tactful, attentive adolescent children. Sometimes, hardly ever, I have seen clearly that a character sent from nowhere is standing in for someone I once knew, disguised as thoroughly as a stranger in a dream. I have always let it stand. Everything I start glides into print, in time, and becomes like a house once lived in.

I was taught the alphabet three times. The first, the scene with the high chair, I remember nothing about. The second time, the letters were written in lacy capitals on a blackboard—pretty-looking, decorative; nuns' handwriting of the time. Rows of little girls in black, hands folded on a desk, feet together, sang the letters and then, in a rising scale, the five vowels. The third time was at the Protestant school, in Châteauguay. The schoolhouse had only two rooms, four grades to each. I was eight: It had been noticed that I was beginning to pronounce English proper nouns with French vowel sounds. (I do it to this day, thinking "Neek" for "Nike," "Raybok" for "Reebok." The first time I saw Ribena, a fruit drink, advertised in the London Underground, I said, "What is Reebayna?" It is the only trace of that lacy, pretty, sung alphabet.) At my new school it was taken for granted that French and Catholic teaching had left me enslaved to superstition and wholly ignorant. I was placed with the six-year-olds and told to recite the alphabet. I pronounced *G* with its French vowel sound, something like an English *J*. Our teacher pulled down over the blackboard a large, illustrated alphabet, like a wide window blind. I stood in front of the blind and was shown the letter *G*. Above it a large painted hand held a tipped water jug, to which clung, suspended, a single drop. The sound of *G* was the noise the drop would make in a water glass: it would say *gug*.

"The sound of *G* is *gug*. Say it after me. *Gug*."

"*Gug*."

"Everyone, now. *Gug, gug, gug*."

"*Gug, gug, gug*."

"What letter is it?"

"*G*."

"What does it say?"

"*Gug*."

"Don't forget it, now."

Whatever it was, it could never be sung.

* * *

Good and bad luck comes in waves. It was a wave of the best that brought me to William Maxwell, my editor at the *New Yorker* who read my first story and every other for the next twenty-five years. He turned away the IOUs I tried to hand him, which announce just simply that I owed him everything. And so I am writing another one here, with no possibility of any answer: I owe him everything. When we met for the first time, in the spring of 1950, I did not immediately connect him to the author of *The Folded Leaf*. He, of course, said nothing about himself at all. He asked just a few questions and let me think it was perfectly natural to throw up one's job and all one's friends and everything familiar and go thousands of miles away to write. He made it seem no more absurd or unusual than taking a bus to visit a museum. Everyone else I knew had quite the opposite to say; I felt suddenly like a stranded army with an unexpected ally. I was about to try something entirely normal and that (he made it sound obvious) I was unlikely to regret.

He seemed to me the most American of writers and the most American of all the Americans I have known; but even as I say this, I know it almost makes no sense and that it is undefinable and that I am unable to explain what I mean. I can get myself out of it only by saying it is a compliment.

There is something I keep wanting to say about reading short stories. I am doing it now, because I may never have another occasion. Stories are not chapters of novels. They should not be read one after another, as if they were meant to follow along. Read one. Shut the book. Read something else. Come back later. Stories can wait.

—MAVIS GALLANT