

# Fall

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## Summer

DOC.

That's not my real name, of course, I have many, but it's what the people of Fall started to call me from the day I arrived here, now close to a year ago.

I lie.

It was the day after, when the sheriff paid me a visit. He parked his pick-up out front – I was passing the living room window with a heavy cardboard box in my arms and I still remember looking outside, the six-pointed silver star on its side sparkling in the sun, and thinking: that was fast. The low rumble of its V6 burrowed through my belly.

He was standing in the hall before I had the chance to put down the box. I had left the door open; it was muggy, a first introduction to the typical, resin-scented heat that nestled under the tree crowns all summer long and lingered there encapsulated until the first jab of winter deflated the resulting hot-air balloon and replaced it with a glassy cold and so much snow that everything white was barred from your house after winter had passed.

His swiftness surprised me; his inclination to corpulence was unmistakable. His body had an aura of creamy listlessness. But crocodiles give the same impression. You presume they only thrive in water, with their lengthy torso and paddle feet, but they can also be lightning fast on land if they have to: they draw in their sagging paunch and flail through the soil with outstretched claws, filling the air with dust, and before you know it your skull cracks between their teeth.

'You must be the new Doc.' He tapped his Stetson and hooked his thumbs behind his belt. His handgun glimmered. I leaned forward, put down the box, clapped the dust from my hands, and walked towards him with a smile and an outstretched arm.

'I would do that if I were you.'

My smile tensed. He motioned with his chin toward the box. 'Very bad for the back. You have to use your knees. You should know that, Doc.'

I relaxed and shook his hand. His chubby hand was dry as a bone.

'The fate of every doctor. Plenty of good advice, but a bad example in the end.'

'In the end?'

'When we die. Bad advertising.'

He looked at me and grinned. I noticed the air quiver behind him.

'A beer?'

I headed to the kitchen without waiting for an answer, his slow footsteps on the hardwood floor in my wake.

'Is Madeleine here?'

'No, she's still in Capitol.'

I had met Madeleine at a conference on anaesthesia. She was drinking alone in the hotel bar: a veterinarian, ugly, and looking for a new partner to share her practice. 'Lyndon finally gave up the ghost, the old bugger. I only use the barn, to be honest; a couple of cages, a horsebox, a freezer, and a separate office – a table and a chair, really. That's it. Your surgery is in the house. I pay rent; we stay out of each other's way.'

Madeleine gave me a number. I called from the lobby and talked to Lyndon's son who'd been living in California for years. The price was reasonable; we sorted out the paperwork by mail. Things can be simple sometimes. Most of the time, actually. You just have to be prepared to cut the ballast.

'She's visiting her sister.' That's what Madeleine had told me when we were drinking a toast to our agreement. This time it was me and the sheriff clinking beers. I went outside ahead of him via the insect screen. Little more than a patchy stretch of lawn with a few insects buzzing lethargically back and forth, the backyard faced north, but that didn't help much to relieve the heat. The fringes of the surrounding woods offered some shade; I grabbed a couple of folding chairs and we sat down out of the sun. We didn't speak for a while. We looked at the heat rippling above the parched stalks of grass and listened to the dry cracking of the trees. A chunk of time and summer was lost.

The sheriff gulped awkwardly at his beer, suppressed a burp, and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

'It's none of my business, Doc. Then again it's my job to stick my nose into other people's affairs – call it occupational conditioning – but what brings a young doctor like you to Fall?'

'Chance, sheriff.' I told him about meeting Madeleine and the phone call to Lyndon. 'But you already knew that – otherwise we wouldn't be sitting here. And chance is never a reason, is it, more the absence of one.'

'I like to think that there's a reason behind seemingly random events. That's what I do: expose hidden motives, discover connections when there don't appear to be any. If everything is chance, then my work is meaningless.'

'So there's no such thing as accident? Every coincidence conceals an endless chain of cause and consequence, a succession of millions of traceable reasons that lead to an inevitable confluence of circumstances? Then you're right, there's no such thing as accident. Then it's just a facile generic term for our ineptitude and our incapacity to recognise all those hidden cogwheels for what they are. That creates new problems, for you at least. If that's the case then everything is unavoidable, the result of some mechanism that went out of control centuries ago and has been spinning red hot and flat out ever since. Then no one is really responsible for their deeds. No one is guilty. Surely that's not what you're implying?'

The sheriff remained politely silent.

'Apologies. One of my hobby horses. Let's say I'm not convinced the world is a rational construction that can be fathomed with logic. There's too much of the contrary around. I prefer to stick with chance. Chance and chaos.'

Tiredness hit me from nowhere. I'd been lugging stuff around for the best part of a day and a half and hadn't eaten anything worth mentioning, beyond a tub of ice-cream. I hadn't brought much with me, but Lyndon senior turned out to have been a serious hoarder, the type that can't throw anything away, that clings to the past. In that sense I was different. 'Pack it all up. You can keep what you can use for the practice; I don't want any of it. And if you don't know what to do with something, store it in the garage. If I ever come back to Fall – God forbid – I'll pick it over. But you can junk the rest of it as far as I'm concerned.'

Lyndon junior's inheritance clearly left him cold. And he was right. Lyndon's house was full of tired furniture, and his equipment was so hopelessly antiquated it left me in despair. Maybe it was the heat after all. I threw back the dregs of my beer. It was lukewarm.

'Be that as it may. To be honest, sheriff, I was fed up with the city. The hustle and bustle, the excess of people primarily. The noise they made day and night, the flashiness and fuss – I couldn't take it anymore, simple as that. It took a while before I admitted it to myself, but I don't do well surrounded by concrete monsters. I miss panorama. Green. Water. Uncultivated nature – as opposed to a park with five trees in a straight line.'

I sighed. Looked at my empty beer bottle. The sun sparkled in its base.

'Peace and quiet, sheriff, top priority. You might as well call it the enemy in the city. You can't find it there. In the city you have to be doing something all the time, preferably at full tilt, running from pillar to post. The future is all that matters, your plans, not what you're doing now. Everything is instantaneously past tense – 'now' doesn't exist in the city; it stubbornly refuses to see the splendour of a stationary moment. It made me restless – and I still am. Day after day I was encouraging stressed patients to relax, slow down a little, while I was racing from one appointment to the next. As I said, plenty of good advice, to which I didn't listen.'

Another short silence. Nothing but the creaking and blistering of the earth. An insect stopped for a moment to hover in front of eyes like a hummingbird, and before I could summon the energy to swipe at it, it zigzagged off, almost sneeringly, as if to show how free it was to navigate this world.

The sheriff cleared his throat. 'Well Doc, if you're looking for nature and quiet then you've come to the right place. I'm guessing you didn't come by boat?'

I understood what the sheriff meant. Madeleine had also tried to fob me off with the ferry. It was only later that I figured out why. 'It's not really the fastest service, and sometimes you have to wait a whole day, but in the last analysis it's... easier. If you can handle the sea, of course. The crossing can take between twelve and eighteen hours depending on conditions. You can always ask the skipper for a cabin, catch up on some shut-eye, and there's a bar of sorts – more like a bottle on the table to be passed around. Or you can bring a book.' Madeleine was a little too keen about the ferry for my taste, as if the skipper was a distant cousin and she didn't mind putting the odd fare his way. I didn't trust it, eighteen hours on a boat in the company of a lonely skipper who was bound to interrogate me all the way. I didn't fancy it, even less when I threw open a map and discovered a splendid road, destination Fall.

The only road.

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It was still dark when I left Montreal; there was barely any traffic on Continental Avenue and I crossed Picard Bridge without a hitch, and as I left the city behind me, the dawn unfolded before my eyes, fresh and pink, and it was as if I was waking in unison with the earth, shaking the darkness from my back as it did.

I drove with the window open, determined to burn my left elbow.

First three hundred kilometres to Charlesville where I stopped for a steak, then five hundred to Capitol, slowly branching southward where the population thins; short distances, from gas station to gas station – the smell of coffee, stale toilet tablets and exhaust fumes, the corpse of a racoon on the roadside – through small, nameless settlements, no more than a few houses rubbing against each other, places where I slowed down, even turned the radio low, caressed the gas pedal with my toes, stealthily, so as not to wake anyone.

Somewhere in between I met a girl, Charlene by name, but she didn't interest me. We sat outside at a picnic bench and drank coffee together as we stared at the ten-tonners trundling past. She fidgeted incessantly with the loose threads on her frayed jeans and I bought her a hamburger. She looked as if she could use it. She had been beautiful once, and could be again with a bit of luck, albeit never quite the same as before: wear and tear had sunk its teeth in too deeply, and in a flash I saw her in front of me, many years later, smoking at the kitchen table, menthol cigarettes she stubbed out halfway in a metal ashtray, tea slowly getting cold, in a neatly maintained but otherwise unoccupied house.

'I'm Charlene.'

That was all she said, and she pronounced the words in such a way that she seemed to need convincing of her own name, as if she barely believe it herself.

She clearly wanted a lift, to anywhere as long as it was away from where she was, but I was already on my feet, intent on calling it a day, and as I walked toward my car and the dust swirled around my feet, I looked back half-heartedly one more time and waved – from a distance it must have looked like a gesture of dismissal, and maybe that's what it was: brushing off a vague possibility, a future we would never explore.

Late in the afternoon I took the last and only exit marked Fall. The county road was appropriately named Fall Road and consisted of two lanes, one there and one back, neatly separated by a white line, a long straight white line.

The evening sun smouldered in my rear-view mirror, and as each mile passed I drew closer to my ever lengthening shadow.

I passed an old billboard. A faded fragment of text, flakes of colourless paint – a lost dream.

Only trees after that. Forest.

It was getting dark.

A talk show on the radio babbled on incomprehensibly. The volume wasn't loud enough to tell the voices apart, but it was statement enough that somewhere in a small studio people were messing with microphones and opinions. Some whispers in the dark, that's all I needed, that's all we are.

There was no oncoming traffic. It made me listless and impatient all at once. I missed the sudden appearance of headlights, those silver pinpricks that make you sit up straight, grab the wheel more firmly, consult all the pointers on the digital clock, briefly run your eye over the bag on the passenger seat – you're all set – and then it comes, and faster than you expect: the flash and the roar and the metal, that little air bump in the side, the tension in your jaws, eyes fixed on the road, your eyes one with the red dots disappearing in your rear-view mirror, and then it's over and calm all of a sudden, the tarmac's your own again, stretched out in front of you like a black carpet, and you race ahead, alert, into the night.

Nor the reverse. The sluggish escort, the white light that crawls through the car, pasting shadowy fingers on the dashboard; the rubber band that hangs between you, stretching and shrinking but never snapping – the skin creeps in the back of your neck, you feel exposed, observed, uneasy, and you vacillate, hesitation cramps your calf – speed up, or slow down – but there's no solution, and there's a limit to the number of gnawing miles of this you can endure.

No, neither.

I was the only driver on this long, straight road. Mile after mile.

I became aware of my breathing. The weight of my legs. Felt the mass beneath me swell as if I was driving up a mountain.

I had closed the window. A steely cold had invaded my biceps and no amount of rubbing could shift it. As if something foreign had infected me, flourished in my flesh, and was waiting for the chance to stiffen my entire body.

My eyes had been struggling with the dark for quite some time.

The sunlight had chilled to a vague metallic sheen.

The white line: once a reliable guide that disappeared into the horizon, had now been pared to a hazy stump. And I might have been dreaming that too. Driving blind, staring ardently at some obscure smudge on my retina.

There was no avoiding it. I had to crank up the headlamps to full beam.

An old aversion. Light makes darkness visible.

The nights you head down to the basement with a flashlight to check the fuses during a power outage. The thin cone of light that exposes mostly what you don't see: heaps of black, above and below you, an immense, breathing mass menaced by a miserly shaft of light. Like walking into an inferno armed with a water pistol.

The trees jumped into view at a single click.

All those trunks, those grayish forms, fashioned from faded marble – a petrified army standing in line.

As if holding still.

I remembered a playground game. Someone turned his back to the rest and recited a rhyme. As he spoke everyone was free to move, forward, in the hope they could pass the wizard by. When the words stopped everyone froze. The wizard looked back, peered around. If someone was still moving, lost their balance, moved a foot, blinked – they were out.

You could feel the silence at that moment, its weight. The suspense. The hesitation. The tension like a question mark in your muscles.

You liked being the wizard, but never said. Until you turned around again and felt everything shudder behind you. And closing in.

They were precariously close to the road, with greedy roots reaching out to the asphalt. As if their silvered stems were holding their breath.

Their crowns formed a roof over the concrete. Seen from above: a thin glimmering scar between a billion green scales. From below: a tunnel. Every buttressing stem the rib of a vaulting arch.

I automatically slowed down, leaning over the steering wheel to look up with my mouth hanging open. The shadow of branches: freakish, black thunderbolts on the glass.

Awe – that was the word.

What you feel in cathedrals.

Nothing but static on the radio. The needle flickered, but couldn't hold onto the signal. I couldn't bring myself to turn it off. I read once that static crackle is residue noise, what remains from the big bang. A foundational tone that sounds the same wherever you are in the universe. The echo of a door that was once slammed shut, in the beginning.

I forced my foot to press the gas pedal.

Like an accelerating carousel: one trunk after the other. None exactly the same as the one before, yet little by little a single ribbed whole.

Black scratches on the glass.

Surges of current through the needle.

A swell of static.

The smell of wet leaves that forced its way inside via the air conditioning, pregnant with wood and green.

And then, a star.

I blinked. My chin anchored on the steering wheel to stabilise my gaze. To the right, in the distance, between the foliage, unmistakable: a star.

I slowed down again, afraid I would miss it, afraid I would drive past. I briefly lost sight of it, but then it reappeared: a five pointed star, white on a dark background. There, that's where I had to be.

A vague fear gnawed in the background. The fear of ending up like the three wise men who chased a magnificent unreachable comet towering high above them, only to have to settle for a baby in a stable.

You can always trust fear. And it's generally worse than you ever dared surmise; most of the time you're not afraid enough. You always brush it off a tad too lightly. It's nothing, just the wind, a nocturnal breeze billowing through the curtains and caressing the hairs on your neck. It's nothing, creaking timbers, a dry twig cracking in an abandoned forest, a rustle in the bushes, the shrill scratch of a black bird. It's nothing, a shadow glides over the TV screen and you don't dare look behind you. The fleshy sound of something slumping in the fridge. It's nothing. The tickle of a spider's leg on a nipple, the flicker of a scalpel – it's nothing, nothing at all.

It was a sign.

Two metal poles and a board, half overgrown, with only a star poking out. A stupid symbol, a sign on a board. Not a comet in the heavens, or a guide, or a way out – not even a dry-nursed baby in a manger.

I exhaled some irritated air through my tightly pressed lips. It didn't help. My hands itched and the car suddenly seemed to have shrunk, all its glass, metal and fake leather just that bit too close. I turned the ignition key, testily, as if I wanted to pinch something really hard. The engine stopped with a sigh, or better said a relieved shudder. I immediately regretted it. I'd seen cars refuse to do their duty in too many films; too many bank robberies with sputtering getaway cars, too many flooded carburettors as the maniac with the chainsaw gets closer and closer. Too much flickering celluloid with reality glimmering through. But too late, always too late.

I threw open the door in agitation. A rush of cool evening air against my cheek. I stepped out of the car too quickly, too rashly. I was immediately less. Diluted.

A low mist hovered in the headlight beams. It wriggled from between the trees, crossed the road languid and unruffled, and disappeared between the trunks on the other side. I also felt misty, as if the slightest breeze could fray me apart.



Breath surrounded me – the cold vapour of the forest. Its grandeur menaced me, me, here on this narrow strip of asphalt, alone, on a godforsaken evening.

I embraced my arms, to hold myself together, and walked toward the sign, trailing my shredded existence behind me.

I clung to details.

A seed tuft hovering just above the mist, a featherweight orb with white tentacles of the finest hair playfully exploring the world. A leaf let loose from its branch, flurrying past in a fluttering spiral.

I wished I was an ant, something puny, something more fitting to my size. Something too small to be scared.

I focused my eyes on the ground, no more than a yard or so in front of my feet. The sign had to be close. Yet it still kept me waiting; time transformed into a spider's web, the rarefied remains of a web, deep in the winter.

Then I suddenly bumped into the poles. They were hard and tangible, of lifeless metal. A neighbouring tree held the board in its grip: a hand of branches clasped the colossal sign as if it was about to rip it from the ground. The star glistened between the gnarled fingers.

I examined the claws of wood, my arms still wrapped around my chest – the tips of my fingers resting in the hollows between my ribs. I shivered involuntarily; to be able to see the rest of the sign I had to touch the branches, break them like fingers during an interrogation. Right away, even before the first crack, I felt a dry sound just below my jaw, like gravel in my throat, and I forced a yawn to swallow the hardened lumps. The cold met my teeth.

How was I going to reach it? The lower part of the sign was already at eye level and there was nothing in my car I could use as a step. And even if I could get close enough, I wasn't in the mood to blunt my scalpel on it. I briefly considered just leaving it be: dropping my arms, turning around, getting into the car and following that damned road to the end. What did I care about the sign and its secret?

Something in me seeped out. At once I was more stable, better defined – my body resisted once again and I felt my surroundings collide with me anew instead of flowing through me. I noticed things; the vicinity and its sounds.

For the first time since I got out of the car, years back, I heard the presence of silence: the ticking of the engine cooling under the hood, the gentle rustle of the crowns like the calm heartbeat of a sleeping monster, the timid hum of an insect skimming past, perhaps even the angular flapping of a bat in pursuit. The folding of moist moss under my soles.

And the singing.

Once, in a distant summer, I had heard the same under the transmission towers. Thin singing, as if millions of human voices pressed together were whooshing through the electricity cables high above me, racing toward their destination, the other side of the line. Every few meters, huge balls had been threaded like beads over the cables, and I dreamt I would own such a ball one day,



somehow convinced that they fell to the ground like ripe fruit in the autumn. A ball full of smouldering voices.

The singing came from my left. A fine background noise, no more than a low hum with the sporadic crackle of electric charge. You had to cock your ears to hear it.

There was the source, a few yards from the sign, on both sides of the road, on an incline covered with dry stubbly grass: ten feet high, made of diamond-shaped wire mesh stretched tight between poles buried deep in the ground, splitting into a 'v' on top to form a roof of barbed wire – an electric fence that was audibly live. And, on closer inspection, not only parallel to the road. The fence made a right turn and cut through the forest. Roughly six yards of forest had been dug up on either side of the construction; only a fool would consider climbing a tree and having a go.

I stared nonplussed at the impressive edifice. Was it a nature reserve? A private estate? Hunting ground? It was certainly vast. There wasn't an end in sight, in the forest or on the road; the metal disappeared like a ruthless razorblade into three horizons at once. Spine-chilling perfection.

Lying on the incline, half covered by the loose soil, I spotted a couple of rods, remnants from the construction. I kicked them first with the tip of my shoe to be sure they weren't electrified, wriggled one of them free and dragged it to the sign. The metal felt gritty, an earthen cold invaded the palms of my hands.

I lifted the rod and waved it aimlessly at first, as if trying to balance a rubber baton, but once accustomed to my new centre of gravity I rediscovered my equilibrium and was thus able to tinker with the overhanging branches.

The wooden fingers suffered bruising. Pale, stringy fibres emerged from beneath the bark, which turned mushy under my dull thumps. Leaves tore and fragments of green snowed to the ground. The sound of snapping wood and metal scraping metal grated against the roots of my teeth. Swallowing didn't help.

Little by little, lesion after lesion, letters were exposed. White, squared letters. The grip of the wooden claws had left them marbled, a seemingly very exclusive font, the sort you could only order from a few stationary stores worldwide. Panting, and with a rusty cramp in my arms, I finally lowered the rod.

FALL MILITARY BASE

CAMP X

THE GATEWAY

All I could do was stare at it.

But it still made me a tiny bit nervous, as if a jeep could appear from the forest at any moment, thundering toward me, an armoured vehicle, decked out with powerful spotlights and soldiers on footboards with sturdy helmets and night-glasses who would surround me in no time, force me to my knees with stern, menacing commands and raised rifle butts, while one of them deftly lassoed my hands and tied them behind my back with a plastic noose that bit deeper into my wrists with every wriggle of resistance, then manhandled me into the trunk, a black hood over my head, my

chest to the floor that smelled vaguely of rifle oil and soil, the ribbed sole of an army boot pressed between my shoulder blades, jiggling and jolting toward an unknown destination, to hollow sounding vaults deep under the ground, dragged me on my knees and the points of my shoes over a shiny polished concrete floor, my underarms in the grip of two muscled claws, until I felt a needle penetrate my lower arm, only to wake up hours – days? – later, naked, shackled to a metal chair in a windowless room with a powerful desk lamp pointing at my face, eradicating every darkness, shining into my very brain, opening wide my mind like a carcass to allow nameless men with latex fingers to poke around in search of secrets, in search of the reason for my presence – my presence, which was already incriminating enough; why the interrogation, why would I be sitting here at all if I hadn't done something terrible, or was I trying to suggest that they, with all their secret cognisance, their clandestine omniscience, their information apparatus that has the whole world in its tentacles, that they, judges and executioners and gods all at once, had made a mistake, while the opposite was patently obvious, that my mere existence, or what remained of it – a shivering pile of trash, as irritating to them as a sliver of meat between their teeth – that my life was a massive, sickening misunderstanding, a vile superfluity that they should flush down the drain like a cockroach, and that they, and they alone, were in the right, and my only right, my final right to existence, was a confession, a mea culpa that couldn't save me, never, but could grant me at most a little dignity, that confessing everything was my only chance to finally, finally become what I always wanted to be: pure in the hour of my death.

No. None of that.

I stood there in the cold night air and stared at the sign, ran my eye one last time along the silver fence, turned and got into the car. Which started first time.

I saw the mist swirl in my rear-view mirror. The road in front of me. The barriers melted left and right into a glistening wall as I accelerated.

And I drove and I drove and drove.

No more.

Only the bead of warm sweat running down my left temple.