

THE SECONDARY 4 CLASS OF PRETTYGOOD PARK HIGH SCHOOL

By Claude Lalumière

A few minutes before 6 a.m., on the first day of spring 1982, the entire secondary 4 class of Prettygood Park High School gathered at the foot of the Montreal moonbridge, a few blocks west of the Jacques-Cartier Bridge, which at dawn was already bringing the South Shore suburban traffic into the city.

The nearly one hundred students chattered among themselves. Punks, preppies, stoners, freaks, geeks, jocks, brainiacs, squares, loners... all those arbitrary divisions melted away in the anticipation of the journey to come. Mr. Saint-Michael, the math teacher and field-trip coordinator, wended his way through the crowd of teenagers, all of them equipped with camping gear, and took attendance.

Stopping next to a long-haired boy dressed in frayed white jeans, a black T-shirt emblazoned with a blood-red anarchist symbol, a too-large beige business jacket, and mud-encrusted sneakers, the teacher exclaimed, "Mr. Fort!" Mr. Saint-Michael always addressed the students with a formality that was equal parts respect and irony. "How good of you to grace us with your presence today!" The bite was taken out of the sarcastic rebuke

by the conspiratorial wink the teacher exchanged with his favourite student.

It was true that Luke Fort was notorious for skipping class. But he also achieved the highest grades in school and had a knack for charming his teachers, who all let him get away with showing up in class sporadically, as long as he was careful not to miss exams or deadlines for handing in assignments. The charm that made him breeze through the academic part of school life did not, alas, work on his peers. Luke wasn't exactly friendless, but he wasn't exactly popular, either.

After Mr. Saint-Michael had walked on, Montague Farmer hissed into Luke's ear, "So, Tofu." Luke hated that nickname; he wished no-one had ever noticed that he didn't eat meat. Luke didn't even like tofu. "Do you suck him off, or does he prefer to fuck you in the ass?"

Luke tried to ignore the taunt, but he couldn't help turning to sneer at Montague. Although he behaved like a jock, Montague was a short, mousy, shifty twerp, a used-car salesman in a rat's body. And yet, he got invited to all the parties and was dating Blair Jonas, who was right at that moment holding Montague's hand and pointedly avoiding Luke's gaze. Blair was a full six inches taller than Montague and much too pretty to be seen at his arm. At least, that's what Luke thought.

Luke had had a crush on Blair since the previous year, when he'd tutored her in math. They had sat close together; she exuded a peach scent that ensorcelled him. She'd found out about the vegetarianism when she stayed for dinner at his house once. He'd always been careful to keep that detail about himself private. The next day, she'd starting calling him Tofu at school, and the nickname stuck. For some reason beyond Luke's control, his crush had stuck, too.

Luke's train of thought was interrupted by a loud, wince-inducing sound of metal grating against metal: the guardian was opening the moonbridge portal.

Every day he could manage it, just before breakfast and just before dinner, Luke jogged the eight kilometres from his house to the moonbridge, so he could witness this moment—the opening of the portal—and see the guardian. The moonbridge

was on a six-hour schedule: open from 6 a.m. to noon, and then again from 6 p.m. to midnight. Most days, the guardian looked more or less the same to Luke: a ten-foot marble giant dressed like a Roman legionary. The most spectacular aspect Luke had ever witnessed was that of a gargantuan thousand-armed snake whose colours changed every time the guardian moved in the slightest. No two people saw exactly the same thing when they looked at the guardian, and on film or video the guardian appeared as a blur. It was the same with moonbridge guardians all over the world.

Today, the guardian appeared to Luke as a winged woman hovering a few feet above the ground. It had long, flowing white hair, wore a dress of white mist, and held a silver caduceus in each hand.

Luke felt a tap on his shoulder. It was his friend Benjamin House, the only one in school who didn't call him Tofu. Benjamin was the secondary 4 class's other teacher's pet. His grades matched Luke's, but Benjamin was a hard worker and assiduous, obedient student with a clean, conservative look, unlike Luke, who ignored most rules and who dressed with clueless randomness, as if fashion of any kind were an utterly alien concept. For the last three years, the teachers and other students had been trying to foster rivalry between the two boys, but, despite their differences, the two enjoyed a relaxed camaraderie, oblivious to everyone's expectations. "Luke, is it true we all see something different?" Benjamin's face had lost all its colour.

"Are you okay, Ben?"

"Tell me what you're seeing, buddy. Tell me you're not seeing what I'm seeing."

Luke told his friend about the winged woman. "What do you see?"

Benjamin stammered something incoherent, but then managed to collect himself sufficiently to say, "I can't tell you. I don't ... It's too ... Holy! I don't know if I can go through with this." Ben was shaking, now.

"Not go through...? You mean not take the Moon trip? But, Ben, you have to. You might never get another chance. It's so

rare to be allowed through by the guardians ever again. This is our time."

Absolutely still, Ben stared at the guardian. He whispered, "It's changing."

Luke said, "Changing? I've never seen the guardian actually change. It never looks exactly the same from one time to the next, but to see a transformation..." Luke, for whom the guardian still appeared as flying woman with wings, became wrapped up in his long-nurtured obsession with the moonbridge and didn't notice his friend's increasing terror.

And then Ben screamed, which silenced everyone, even the Gaul twins, who never seemed to stop muttering to each other. Ben's scream was a horrible thing, a high-pitched screech that froze Luke's heart.

Luke reached out to clasp Benjamin's shoulder. "Ben..." But the instant his fingers brushed the other boy, Ben sped away. Within a few seconds, he was gone from sight.

Mr. Saint-Michael's face betrayed consternation and a tangible tension started buzzing through the assembly, but the teacher lost no time steering the situation back on course. In his loud, theatrical voice, Mr. Saint-Michael addressed the gathering: "We can't let Mr. House's personal drama interfere with this momentous day, which is a once-in-a-lifetime event for you all. Mr. House will just have to live with his own decision."

Luke, who had been looking forward to this day for his entire life, hung back while the other students started to walk up to the guardian, who scrutinized each student before letting them through and onto the bridge.

Once the procession acquired a momentum of its own, Mr. Saint-Michael walked over to Luke. The teacher spoke in a low, calm voice: "Luke," hearing the teacher use his given name imbued the moment with a fragile intimacy, "you're not seriously thinking of not going? I know Benjamin is your good friend, but this is too important. Mr. House would not want you to stay behind on his account. It would only increase his distress for him to know that he had caused you to not undertake this journey."

"Don't worry, Mr. Saint-Michael. I'm worried about Ben, but there's no way I'm not travelling to the Moon this morning. Still, I

wish he'd come back. I think I'm dithering because I want to see if he'll return. I want him come."

"There's almost no-one left. You should get in line, Mr. Fort."

"Yes, sir. Are you coming, too? Sometimes, the guardian lets people go through again."

"No. I undertook the journey when I was your age. This is for young people, Mr. Fort. It wouldn't be right for me to risk interfering. Besides, there's no guarantee the guardian would let me through, so why even entertain the notion?" For a moment, Mr. Saint-Michael appeared lost in a daydream, but he abruptly snapped out of it. "Enough of that. Go now, Mr. Fort. Go!"

Luke nodded at the teacher and walked toward the bridge. Before stepping up to the guardian's post, he scanned the horizon one final time, hoping to see his friend, but Benjamin had not returned.

Luke now stood facing the guardian. From this close, Luke experienced a disconcerting, overlapping double vision: the guardian as a winged woman hovering a few feet in the air but also—at the same time and occupying the same space—as a giant mechanical construct made up of gears and hydraulics whose full geometry defied the limits of his perception. Luke tried to concentrate on that second image, convinced that it was the guardian's true mien, convinced that seeing the guardian for what it really was would grant him an understanding heretofore denied him. But before another moment had elapsed, the guardian's appearance solidified into that of the winged woman, who motioned for the boy to step onto the moonbridge.

Even standing a few steps from the ornately decorated metal portal, Luke could not see anything but darkness beyond its threshold. He took a moment to examine the carvings. He ran his fingers on a likeness of a strange bulbous creature with no eyes and three limbs. The metal felt unlike anything he had ever touched. He took another step and climbed onto the moonbridge itself.

Into the distance, Luke noticed small shapes moving along the moonbridge. But there weren't enough of his classmates to account for all the moving shapes. Who else was on the bridge?

The scaffolding of the moonbridge was part metal, part grey stone, part gigantic wooden vine—or was it of one material that somehow took on aspects of all these things? Leaves of muted reds, browns, and greens grew from "metal", "stone", and "wood"—or whatever the moonbridge materials were—confusing Luke's notions of living and nonliving. Grabbing hold of a support beam, Luke was reminded of the texture of the portal doorway.

The sky was a subtly iridescent indigo blue that, mixed with the faint golden glow of the stars, suffused everything with a subtle green tint. Planets, stars, and other celestial bodies appeared much closer than they did from the surface of the Earth, yet also more otherworldly and bizarre than Luke had previously imagined.

As with the guardian when Luke had stood right next to it, Luke mistrusted the evidence of his eyesight. The entire universe, and everything in it, shimmered, as if unable to hold on to any specific form. Even the moonbridge itself seemed subtly different every time Luke focused on it.

In the sky—above, below, and all around him—Luke could detect movement between the various celestial bodies. There was an irregularity to path taken by the flying objects that suggested biological rather than mechanical locomotion.

In the far distance, the bridge reached the Moon, haloed in undulating shades of grey, blue, and green. Luke marched forward, toward that destination he had dreamed of for so long.

Swallowing his last handful of trail mix, Luke looked back toward the destination he had come from. He could no longer detect the source of the bridge. Forward, the Moon now loomed much larger than it had when he had set off on his journey. But of the Earth, there was no sign. Nor had he yet encountered anyone, although a few times he'd heard the leaves rustle as if someone were moving through the strange rock-metal-vegetation the bridge was constructed of. It could not have been the wind, because there was only the slightest of breezes, nothing strong enough to cause such commotion. Despite

himself, despite his desire for this entire journey to be a wondrous adventure, Luke was growing scared at the thought of who or what might be hiding from his sight in this alien environment, and the longer he stayed on the bridge the more the fright settled into his bones.

He thought he had packed sufficient provisions for the journey—enough to last him three or four days. He wasn't sure how long he'd been travelling, because his watch had stopped working the moment he had crossed the portal and there was no day-and-night cycle on the moonbridge—only an unchanging jade-blue crepuscule. It felt as though he had been walking nonstop for close to a week, but he had not yet slept and up to this point had been only mildly tired. Looking at the Moon, though, which, in spite of its larger size, still looked unattainably far, Luke was seized by despair at the notion that he might never make it there. And with that despair came a deep exhaustion that made him want to lie down on the floor of the bridge, which was of the same rock-metal-vegetation as the rest of the structure.

Just as Luke was getting ready to succumb, he heard and saw the leaves move behind him, to either side, and atop. He now fully gave in to the fear that had been gnawing at him and mindlessly ran forward toward the distant Moon.

When his aching legs and burning lungs brought Luke back to self-awareness, he stopped running. He unstrapped his knapsack, which contained all his camping gear, bent over, hands on his thighs, and panted coarsely.

The boy took stock of his situation. There was no doubt that the Moon was now much closer, but how close he could still not determine. What little encouragement his progress might have inspired was mitigated by his physical condition: his stomach growled in hunger; his eyelids rebelled against staying open; his throat was raw from dehydration; his legs ached from overexertion. He could not imagine how he could ever make it across the bridge to the Moon. He knew for certain that he could

not turn back; he would not survive the duration of the return journey.

He yearned to sleep, but he dared not. He thought he might never wake, that he would fall prey to some fatal violation. Feeling as though there were no other option open to him, Luke strapped on his knapsack and trekked onward toward the Moon and the shimmer of its faintly reassuring blue-green-grey aura.

A few hundred metres back, Luke had entered a particularly lush section of the moonbridge. Fruit of strange shapes and unfamiliar colours hung from the bridge's vinelike framework. Luke was wary of eating the alien substances, lest they be poisonous. But he had not eaten in what now seemed like weeks of nonstop walking and sleeplessness, and his resistance wavered. He approached one fruit that was shaped somewhat like a small rodent and smelled it. It had no aroma. He smelled other fruits of other shapes and disquieting colours, but none of them exuded a detectable odour.

Hunger got the better of caution, and Luke ripped off a fruit that looked like a tumescent saxophone and ravenously bit into it, before he could second-guess himself.

The thing tasted like chalk and was very dry at first bite. In his mouth, though, it dissolved into a thin, watery substance that immediately refreshed him. He devoured the whole thing and afterward felt sated and restored—euphoric, even. He grabbed an empty plastic bag from his knapsack and filled it with the bland bridgefruit.

Luke contemplated the Moon, which now loomed larger than anything he'd ever seen. He strutted toward his destination with a new bounce in his step.

The lushness of the bridge increased as the Moon neared. Soon, Luke was engulfed within the stone-metal-plant material of the moonbridge, unable to see either sky or Moon. Unable, in fact, to see anything. He scraped and scratched his hands and face repeatedly as he moved forward within the dark tunnel of

the moonbridge. Whenever panic threatened to overwhelm him, Luke ate some bridgefruit; while it didn't completely reassure him, the taste was calming him enough for him to continue his journey with a modicum of levelheadedness.

At one point, Luke thought he'd hit a dead end, but, after eating more bridgefruit to stave off despair, he palmed the walls of the tunnel until he found a narrow opening at a tilt from the direction he'd come from. The tunnel remained thus—mazelike, confining, difficult—for several turns, during which the boy further lacerated his already ill-treated flesh on the thorny walls of his surroundings.

After a dozen turns, though, the tunnel opened up. At first, elated at the turquoise demi-light of the sky and the open space, Luke failed to notice that the Moon no longer loomed ahead. In the distance, he noticed pitched tents and the sound of conversations reached him. It was only then that Luke realized that he had reached the Moon.

He headed toward the camp, toward his classmates from the secondary 4 class of Prettygood Park High School.

As soon as Luke reached the periphery of the camp, conversation stopped. No-one greeted him, and his classmates either avoided his gaze or looked at him in icy silence. He was used to this kind of treatment, but it nevertheless stung that none of them was able to move beyond that pettiness, so far from everything any of them knew.

Still feeling unsettled from the bridge crossing, Luke pitched his tent near the others, not wanting to be isolated. Regardless of what the others thought of him.

Inside his tent, exhaustion overwhelmed Luke and he promptly fell asleep, before he could unroll his sleeping bag.

Sometime later, Luke awoke to an eerily seductive cooing. The sound was unmistakably feminine, yet unlike anything he had ever heard before. From the outside, someone unzipped the flap of his tent, and to his surprise Blair Jonas slipped inside, without a shred of clothes on, her skin glowing with the same colours as the Moon.