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OPEN SEASON

A Luc Vanier Novel

PETER KIRBY



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– *Montreal Review of Books*

OPEN SEASON

A LUC VANIER NOVEL

PETER KIRBY



To my brother Jim and my almost-brother Frank.

And to my sisters Esme, Carol, and Lisa.

I love you all.

ONE

Katya Babyak was lying on a steel bed in a dilapidated three-storey public housing unit in Rotterdam. The room was small and unheated, furnished with only the bed and a small dresser. Her battered suitcase lay open on the linoleum floor. She spent all her time on the bed, shivering under a threadbare blanket that made no difference in the damp cold. Three days so far, three days inside a locked room, waiting.

She had waited in Kiev too, waited until they told her it was time to go, and put her and four others in the back of a truck, hidden behind cardboard boxes piled to the roof. The drive from Kiev to Rotterdam had taken two days, with stops every now and then to allow her and the others to go to the toilet in desolate service centres just off the highway. At each stop they gave her water. Once, they gave her a sandwich and a coffee.

Now, in the room in Rotterdam, a daily routine had already been established. Just after sunrise the same small

man unlocked the door and let her out to use the bathroom. He never said anything, just leered and gestured to where she had to go, as if he hadn't given the same instructions the previous day, and the one before. If she took too long, the small man pounded on the door to hurry her along. Afterwards, he watched her walk back to her room. He locked the door, and then she could hear the same routine repeated in three other rooms. When everyone had finished with the bathroom, the man would start a second round, opening Katya's door to hand her a plastic-wrapped sandwich, the kind you get from vending machines in bus terminals, and a bottle of water. Sometimes there was a bag of potato chips. That would be the end of any contact until the man came back, about two hours after it got dark.

Nobody told her what was happening. She knew she just had to wait. They had promised to take her to Canada and they had taken her this far. However long it took, she would wait. She had tried to shout to the people in the other rooms. The small man came running. He opened the door and slapped her across the face. "Quiet. No noise. You understand?"

She nodded at him, her cheek burning from the slap.

She spent the time lying under the thin blanket, flipping through an English phrasebook. When the intricacies of *I would like to have breakfast, please*, and *How much does this cost?* became too difficult, she did what everyone with nothing but time and no distractions would do. She retreated into her thoughts, reliving memories, the only

things of value she had.

Katya began to catalogue her life, putting everything she could remember into chronological order. The early memories were nothing but fragments, like broken pieces of coloured glass that hint at what they once were, or snapshots that force you to imagine what was happening before and after the moment they were taken.

Her earliest memory was the colour and taste of a glass of lemonade that someone, probably her mother, had poured from a large bottle. She knew this had happened at the seaside. The lemonade was a shade of yellow she had never seen since, a yellow that even now made her mouth water, a yellow as clear as sunlight. The lemonade tasted of summer fruit, tart and sweet at the same time. She tried to build on the fragment of memory, inventing more than remembering the before and after that might have surrounded the taste. She reconstructed a family outing to the coast when she and Stephan were still very young, when their parents were still alive. She knew her father would have been there. Her mother had kept a photograph of a visit to the coast. Katya was a baby, sitting on his knees as he beamed into the camera. That wasn't the lemonade day. She was too young in the photo to drink lemonade, and Stephan was not yet born, and on the lemonade day, the whole family had been there, her mother and father and Stephan, she was sure of it.

She remembered sitting with Stephan on the brown couch in the living room of their first apartment, her mother crying in the armchair while two large police-

men yelled. They wore dark uniforms that made creaking noises when they moved. Katya couldn't remember the words, just shouting and rumbling growls from the men, and the sobbing from her mother. After that, her father's absence had become just another fact, like a crack in a window that had always been cracked, that had always let in the cold.

She probed the memory the way you probe a cracked tooth with your tongue. The policemen's voices had been accusatory, delivering bad news, as though whatever had happened was Katya's mother's fault. Her mother accepted everything, not arguing with the policemen, nodding her head as she cried.

After that, they had lived with her grandmother, an angry, dried-out husk of a woman who spread misery thick enough to eat, and in all those years, there wasn't a single good memory.

Her mother's death was another blur. From one day to the next her mother had simply disappeared. Now, Katya realized there must have been an illness, and it must have lasted weeks or even months. But she remembered no hospital visits, nothing, just a void where their mother had been. One morning, sometime after their mother disappeared, their grandmother dressed Katya and Stephan in formal clothes and led them across Poltava to the crematorium.

They were sitting in a huge room, just the three of them. At the front of the room a cheap wooden casket was mounted on what looked like a ladder lying flat. Her

grandmother pointed at the casket. “That’s your mother. She had bad blood.”

Then, the sound of machinery, and the casket was drawn along the steel rails towards the curtains. The curtains opened to receive the casket, and then closed.

That was the last Katya had seen of her mother.

TWO

There's something special about walking down the street with a woman who looks like she's three leagues out of your own. She gets the looks from passers-by, then they look at you, and you've just scored a point. For Roger Bélair, this was one of those walks—a warm June evening when everything seems right with the world. The woman walking beside him was good-looking by any standards. Bélair wasn't going to be having supper alone for the first night in weeks, and he was beaming.

It wasn't a date. She was a client who had turned up late for a meeting. Bélair was hungry, so he suggested a working supper. She accepted, probably felt sorry for keeping him waiting.

The sun had just set, but it wasn't yet dark. Bélair could see the light from the large bay windows of the restaurant illuminating the street, beckoning to them. When they reached the doorway, he stopped on the narrow sidewalk and gestured like a hotel doorman.

If he hadn't been so distracted he might have seen the huge SUV speeding towards them, its wheels half up on the narrow sidewalk. He noticed nothing until the driver's door opened directly into him and sent him flying forward to the ground. He lay on the pavement for a few seconds before rolling slowly onto his back, struggling to sit up. The woman was being manhandled into the back of the vehicle by two men. Only when the doors slammed shut did he register her screaming. She had been screaming the whole time, but now it was quiet.

Bélaïr struggled to get up, but only managed to make it to his knees. The SUV was already speeding away on Saint-Paul. The licence plate was covered by a rag or paper, he wasn't sure. Turning to see whether anyone else had been watching, he felt the searing pain from his arm. It was bent back at an unnatural angle and blood was seeping from his sleeve.

Immediately, people converged on him.

"Call the police. Somebody call the police," he shouted to no one in particular. Several people raised cellphones to their ears.

The owner of Les Pyrénées stepped out of the doorway. "Maître Bélaïr," he said. He took Bélaïr's good arm and placed it over his own shoulder to help him off his knees. "Come inside. The police will be here soon. And an ambulance. We called an ambulance."

"These people," Bélaïr said, gesturing to the crowd, "they saw it. They're witnesses. We need to get their names."

The owner turned slowly, with Bélaïr's arm still

draped over his shoulder, and said in a loud voice, "Please wait for the police to get here. It's important. And I will serve a cone of pistachio sorbet for everyone who waits. I'll send someone out now."

In Montreal, there aren't many things that convince people to wait around for the police, but on a warm June evening, a pistachio sorbet will do it.

Anjili Segal was sitting across from Luc Vanier, absent-mindedly scanning the menu. She closed it and looked across the table. "Does the thought of moving in with me scare you that much, Luc?"

As a conversation opener it was a showstopper, one that promised a difficult supper.

Vanier liked to say they that he and Anjili had met over a dead body. It was true. One of Montreal's busiest coroners, Segal made dead bodies give up their secrets. The first time they met, the victim had been stabbed and shot, but Segal ruled that he had drowned; he had been alive when he was thrown in the river. Vanier was impressed. After crossing paths professionally a few more times, Vanier had asked her out. Now, three years later, they both agreed that moving in together was the next step.

"I don't know why you say that, Anjili. We just need to find the right place."

She leaned down and pulled glossy folders out of her bag. Six in all. One for each of the condominiums they had visited. But after two months of looking, a pattern was developing. Vanier would point out the obvious drawbacks, while she focused on the good, increasingly

ready to settle for anything. Now they were sitting on a pizzeria terrace on Phillips Square, two blocks from their last visit.

“I know you’re nervous, Luc. But that’s all it is.” She paused. “I hope. We’re good together, and we’d be better living together.”

“I know. And I’m looking forward to it. It’s going to be great. But we need the right place.”

She managed a tired smile. “So we keep at it. Until we find the perfect place?”

He reached for her hand. He couldn’t tell her that he was nervous. The more places he looked at, the more he realized that it might actually happen. He had been on his own for years. Even when Alex was living with him, it had been Vanier’s place and Vanier’s rules, and none of the rules applied to Vanier. He wasn’t sure if he could make the inevitable compromises that living with Anjili would mean. But he couldn’t voice his doubts. They were his problem, not Anjili’s.

“Don’t look so glum,” she said.

“I’m not glum. We’ll find the right place. Soon, I promise. And if we don’t, we’ll settle for almost right.”

The waiter appeared and she looked up at him, ready to order. Vanier continued reading the menu, rubbing the muscles in the back of his neck.

The waiter left.

She tapped the pile of folders. “So which was your favourite?”

Vanier closed the menu. “That’s the problem. They all

looked great.”

Wrong answer. The smile was gone.

“I can’t work with that. Here,” she tapped the pile again. “I’ve put them in order. My order. What do you think?”

Vanier gulped a mouthful of the house wine and puckered. It tasted homemade. He reached for the first folder, a high-rise on McGill College. Their condo would be on the thirty-sixth floor, looking north.

“This one had great views. I liked it. And the furniture was good.”

“Luc, it was a showpiece. We’d put our own furniture in there.”

“I know. But I liked it. I mean with the furniture and all, it looked good. I liked it.”

“That’s it? It looked good? *I liked it?*”

“It’s great. No, it’s not great. It’s good. Lots of space, great views. The balcony was a bit small, though, barely room for two chairs and a table.”

“Okay. What else didn’t you like about it?”

“You sure you want to know?”

“I’m sure. You’re going to be living there too.”

“It was sterile. Like living in an office building. No character.”

“Okay. I know what you mean. Like living in a hotel.” She reached over and took the folder out of his hands. “Right, number two.” She placed another folder before him.

He opened the folder and tried to remember which

one it was. Six places in one day had blurred in his memory. Beautiful kitchens, small bedrooms, living rooms that looked like they came out of some German decorating magazine, and all the time he was wondering where he'd put his stuff, or even if he would be allowed to bring his stuff. Bad thoughts, he knew. But he didn't know how to stop them.

"Good. No, better. This one was better. It seemed to have more space."

"You guys ready to order?" The waiter picked up the carafe of wine and refilled Vanier's glass. Anjili's was still full.

Vanier ordered a seafood pizza. Anjili, goat cheese and prosciutto.

"Luc, if this is too hard on you, you'd better tell me now."

"It's not that, Anjili. I want to live with you. I also want you to be happy, more than anything. But I have yet to see a place where we wouldn't be rubbing shoulders all the time. You and I both need to have space."

"Rubbing shoulders?"

"You know what I mean."

"I'm trying to find out. What is it that you're looking for?"

"A place with lots of room. It could be an old place, doesn't have to be modern. But lots of room."

"You said that."

"Space for us to be together, but space to be alone too. Maybe a terrace, but a big one. Not a birdcage balcony."

"You know that nothing we've seen today fits that

description. Damn, nothing we've seen in the last two months fits that description."

"I know."

The silence hung there. Vanier reached for the wine. Homemade or not, it was taking the edge off the condominium day. Finally, he asked, "What do you think of renting?"

"Like giving it a try before we buy? And when I say 'it', I mean us, you and me. Is that what you're saying, Luc?"

"Maybe. We've both lived on our own for years, and living together is going to take some getting used to."

"I think you mean it's going to take compromise."

"Well, compromise, if you want. But maybe if we rent for a year we'll get a better sense of what we really want."

"Luc, just so we understand each other, there is no way on God's earth that I'm moving into your place."

"I figured that out a long time ago."

"So we need to find neutral ground and rent for a while. Is that what you're suggesting?"

"Maybe we should think about it. As a first step."

She straightened up in the chair, backing away from the table, as though she was backing away from him.

Vanier's phone rang and he was tempted to heave it into the street, but Anjili nodded, giving permission.

He put the phone to his ear. "Vanier."

It was Detective Sergeant Saint Jacques. He listened for a few minutes. "Okay. Maybe twenty minutes." He clicked *End*. He opened his mouth to say something, but

Anjili beat him to it.

“Don’t tell me, Luc. You’ve got to go.”

“It was Saint Jacques. There’s been a kidnapping. I . . .”

“Go. Call me when you’re through.”

Vanier bent down to kiss her on the lips and she returned the kiss, barely. Then raised her hand to hold his arm.

“Luc. It’s been a long day. It’s your job, I understand. Call me, okay?”

“I’ll call.”

The cobblestone streets in the old town were picturesque, but hell to drive on, and Vanier’s Volvo shuddered from the punishment. He was crawling along slower than a horse and cart. He turned right on Saint-Paul and continued along the cobblestones until Saint-Laurent, back on tarmac. Up ahead, the street was closed off by a wooden barrier. He waved his badge out the window and a uniform lifted one end of the barrier to let him through. Farther up the street, he could see a knot of people and an arc light, as though they were shooting a movie.

He drove on and parked up on the sidewalk, scanning the crowd for Saint Jacques. She looked up from her conversation with a woman and waved him over. She was finishing when he got there. “Thank you very much, madame. We’ll be in touch if we need anything else.”

Saint Jacques turned to Vanier and led him away from the crowd.

“Kidnapping, sir. A woman. Two hours ago.”

“Domestic?” asked Vanier. It was the obvious possibility. When a woman was grabbed off the street it was almost always an angry lover, father, or brother.

“Could be. But witnesses say two men grabbed her and pushed her into the back of an SUV. So there were at least three people involved, including the driver. Probably rules out the jealous boyfriend.”

“Could be a family dispute.”

“Like an honour thing?”

“It’s all the rage these days.”

“A couple of the witnesses said she looked foreign.”

“Foreign? Everyone looks foreign to Quebecers.”

“One says Arab, the other Mexican.”

“Any ID?”

“Not yet. Our best chance is a guy she may or may not have been walking with. He was hit by the car door as it passed. He’s been taken to the Montreal General.”

“Serious?”

“He’ll survive. Apparently he was standing up and talking before the ambulance took him. We should be able to talk to him as soon as someone gets to the hospital.”

“Any other witnesses? Besides the ethnologists?”

“A bunch, but nothing strong. A big black SUV. It comes speeding along Saint-Paul. The driver’s door opens and smacks the guy to the ground. The woman starts screaming and is dragged into the car and they take off. Nobody got the licence plates. Depending on who you talk to, the SUV turned first left on Saint-Pierre or kept going along Saint-Paul and then north on McGill.”

Vanier scanned the street as she talked. Rue Saint-Paul was one of the oldest streets in Montreal, dating back to the sixteen hundreds. It was narrow, with businesses, restaurants, and art galleries at street level, and lofts or businesses above. There were no CCTV cameras. Montreal was still far behind on tracking its citizens in public.

“The owner of the restaurant identified the guy who was hit.”

Vanier looked back to Saint Jacques.

“He’s a lawyer. Roger Bélair. He’s a regular at Les Pyrénées. Bélair didn’t have a reservation but the owner says it’s common for him to just show up. Apparently, he always eats alone. So the owner couldn’t help with the woman.”

Vanier had a flash of Anjili finishing her pizza without him. He’d have to make up for that if he didn’t want to be eating the rest of his meals alone.

“We need to talk to Bélair. We’re going nowhere without the name of the victim. Are you about finished here?”

“I was first on the scene, so I need to close it up.”

“Okay. Have someone canvass all the residents of the lofts up there,” he said, gesturing to the upper floors of the surrounding buildings. “And anything on the street that was still open.”

Vanier looked around and saw Detective Sergeant Laurent’s bald head towering over a group of people further up the street.

“I’ll take Laurent to the hospital. I’ll let you know how it goes.”