

Blaise
Thomas Legendre

Where does it end? This road, it seems to go on forever. Blaise glances over at Papa driving with one hand on the wheel and a cigar pinched between his knuckles. He can only guess at the shapes of his father's thoughts, the dull ambitions floating in his mind. They pass a barn with twinned silos, some horses grazing in a fallow field, a stone wall shattered by a fallen oak. Blaise lowers his window to the funk of manure, foliage flaming in afternoon sunlight with scarlet and gold and rust while the radio crackles through the verses he heard in church this morning but in English now: *I will go before thee and make the crooked places straight. I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron.* This is the state of Maine in October of 1933. This is another day in Blaise's life, but he doesn't know if it matters yet.

The planks of a bridge rattle beneath them. Then they turn onto a gravel track among the scrub and deadfall, the gloom of matted pines. The radio dissolves into static. He inhales the smell of damp bark and mulch, a marshy odour. Papa downshifts to climb a slope with loose rocks thunking under their feet, and when they ease downhill he sees something bright through the trees — the restless glare of water. *Oui*, a pond or a lake. A cabin with its roof skewed to one side like a ski jump.

Papa brings the truck to a halt and switches off the engine, the hood exhaling pings and pops and sighs. Humming to himself, he buttons up his collar and takes a final puff from his cigar, the stench like wet leather stinging Blaise's eyes.

'*C'est ça, là,*' he says, with an extra weight in his voice. This is it. He wrenches the door open.

This is what? Blaise hesitates, hoping he can stay here while Papa does whatever he needs to do — a quick errand, eh? — but Papa gives him a glance. Blaise lowers his eyes and climbs out, following Papa's jagged stride through some wildflowers. They pass a woodpile with an axe embedded in a stump, a plot of dirt surrounded by chickenwire. A zinc washtub filled with rainwater, leaves lensed flat in the surface. An outhouse among the weeds over there. As they come up to the cabin it seems perfect to Blaise, like the clubhouse he and Richie Sansouci wanted to build last summer in the weeds by the river where no one would find them, no girls allowed.

Papa hammers on the door and adjusts his glasses as they wait. The sharp cut of his gaze narrowed down to nothing. This isn't a visit. *Non. C'est travaille.* A chore of some kind. That's how it always is with Papa, just a few ounces of pleasure squeezed out of life like someone sipping water in the desert. Blaise glances around the clearing, at the goldenrod stirring in the breeze, the grass swishing with empty thoughts.

He hears a shuffle on floorboards inside and the door opens to an old man with a meaty face, a greasy heap of white hair, his entire body swelled like a sausage. And those eyes, rolling and darting in their sockets, trying to wring sight from the air in front of him.

The old man opens his mouth but then stops himself and turns his head vaguely towards Blaise.

'*Oui,*' Papa says. 'Blaise, the oldest.' Then, turning to Blaise and looking at him for the first time since they've arrived, he says, 'This is your Pèpère.'

The numb sense of the words. *Il est mort, Pèpère.* Blaise has heard it over and over again like a bedtime story: Papa sweeping the floors of the Bourne Mill as a boy

to earn money after his parents died of pneumonia, supporting his brothers and sisters with a child's wage.

The old man extends a hand. Blaise glances up at Papa, who nods once. Blaise reaches out and takes it in a formal handshake. A grave silence afterwards. Then he turns, the old man, and disappears into the cabin.

Papa follows him. Blaise lingers in the doorway because this can't be right and maybe if he waits outside they'll go back to Clarkston sooner, but Papa motions him inside.

The old man drops onto an unmade cot with a sigh. '*Déjà trois mois, Joe?*'

Blaise inhales a musty smell and the faint sting of whiskey in the air. Near him a window with cobwebbed corners ignited in sunlight. A jaundiced wash basin, a cast iron stove. Empty bottles in a crate. And as his eyes adjust to the gloom, he sees the walls pegged with spades and hoes and rakes, a few fishing poles over there, all hovering in space like constellations, the shapes the stars are supposed to make even though he can't find them, no matter how many times he tries to connect the glowing points in the sky.

Papa's starched shirt crackles as he pulls an envelope from his pocket and hands it over to the old man. Blaise is aware of the solid crease in his wool trousers, the stiff pressure of his own shirt and leather shoes. They could have changed after church.

'*Ça va?*' Papa asks.

The old man shrugs and purses his lips. He wipes his hand on his overalls, the knees crusted with mud, before reaching listlessly for the envelope and stuffing it into his bib pocket, the clean white edge protruding square and perfect, like a formal handkerchief. He casts an unfocused look in Blaise's direction.

'Blaise?' the old man says, patting the mattress next to him. '*Assis-tué* with your old Pèpère, eh?'

A moment of panic. Blaise leans forward automatically but then stops, taking a small step to regain his balance as if doing a dance. He glances at Papa's face for guidance but finds nothing there.

He makes his way over to the cot, noticing twigs and leaf shreds clinging to the blanket. A wiry crunch of springs as he sits on the mattress. He can't imagine sleeping on such a thing. He's close enough to smell the vinegary flannel stuck to the man's back, the ground-in dirt, the sun in his skin and an old boozy scent that comes, it seems, from everywhere.

'*Ce matin* you went to church, eh?'

Blaise nods, but then catches himself. '*Oui,*' he says.

'Did you pray?'

'*Bien oui,* Pèpère,' Blaise says, his voice sounding airy and girlish in his ears.

Pèpère smiles at the space above Blaise's shoulder. '*Les mots, oui,* I know you said them. *Tout le monde dit les mots. Mais* that doesn't mean you prayed. *Tu m'comprends?*'

Blaise meets the skewed eyes, the crags of his face. 'God is the only one who knows if we pray.'

He shuts his eyes for a moment and nods gently. '*C'est vrai, ça. C'est vrai.* You know, Blaise, *les Anglais, ils m'payent mué* to take care of *les jardins*, all the flowers there. And you know how I make it happen? I pray.' He pauses, as if listening to the echo of his own words. '*Mais assez,* eh? It's time to give you something.' He leans towards the foot of the bed, springs crinkling beneath him, and reaches into a crate on the floor.

‘*Cette chose,*’ he says, sitting up again, unwrapping a handkerchief, ‘it’s very special. *Mon père* in L’Isle Verte, he saved a sailor from drowning one day. And the sailor, he was so grateful he gave him this.’ He draws a rosary from the folds of the handkerchief, the swelled beads clicking as they glide over his wedding ring.

Blaise reaches out to touch the huge crucifix, made of an oily dark metal, lustrous and cold to the touch.

‘*Qu’est-ce que c’est, ça,* I don’t know what kind of metal this is. *Ton père,* you think he could make this at the foundry, eh?’ He smiles faintly. ‘*Mué,* I don’t think so. It comes from heaven.’ He gropes for Blaise’s hand and then presses the crucifix into his palm. ‘*Tiens.* This is yours. Maybe you can say a prayer for your old Pèpère.’

‘*Merci,*’ Blaise says, looking into this man’s wild and useless eyes. And then a name comes bobbing up to the surface. Samuel. Pèpère Samuel. ‘Thank you, Pèpère.’

A silence falls between them. Blaise hears a soft rush of wind out there, waves lapping faintly at the shore.

‘*Nous quittons,* eh?’ Papa says suddenly.

Blaise stands up and, before he can move, Papa puts a hand between his shoulder blades and nudges him towards the door, where he finds a leather strip tied to a plank and he tugs it open to a shock of sudden daylight. Fresh air. Stepping outside with the crucifix gleaming in his hand, Blaise examines it for a moment. The head, the outstretched arms, the feet nailed to the shaft. Then he loops it around his neck and walks with his hands clasped behind his back like a priest full of wisdom and self-assurance, letting it bump against his belt buckle. He glances back at Papa inside the cabin, saying something to Pèpère. Blaise pivots grandly on his heel and strolls towards the shoreline. A rowboat over there, *là,* tethered to a tree. The rhythm and ripple of the water, the wind filling his shirt like a sail. He could swim to that island in the distance with its bright stains of foliage. The sea must have been calm when Jesus walked across it, otherwise he would have tripped on the waves. When he mentioned it to Sister Catherine last week he expected her to praise the insight, but instead she raised her finger in rebuke and said what she always says. We don’t understand, but we believe.

He turns to see Papa heading to the truck with his lopsided gait, the tilt of his wrecked knee, and Blaise, he dashes across the clearing, the crucifix whacking against his stomach. A full-throated rumble as Papa starts the truck, mowing through some goldenrod before they come bouncing onto the road again. Blaise turns and watches the cabin as it recedes. He eases himself out the window and sits on the frame, sunlight strobing through branches, ferns nodding and a rich haze of dust rising in the truck’s wake. He bends forward over the windshield and searches for Papa’s face through the shadows streaming across the glass until he feels a whack against his shin.

‘*Cré batêche,*’ Papa says, as Blaise lowers himself inside. ‘You’ll lose your head, you.’

There’s a long silence while Blaise tries to think of the best way to ask the question. ‘Was that really Pèpère?’

‘*Oui.*’

‘Then why did you say he was ...’

Papa shifts gears, but doesn’t reply.

Blaise looks out at the blur of passing trees. He turns back to Papa. ‘*Comment a-t-il fait ça,* the cabin?’

‘He didn’t build it,’ Papa says. ‘He won it.’

Blaise tries to imagine P p re in the church basement on Wednesday night.
'Playing beano?'

'*Les cartes.*'

'*Mais* how does he know the cards if he's blind?'

'He wasn't always blind.'

'Then how did he—'

A ragged vibration comes through the floor and Papa curses *tabarnac*, yanking at the gearshift and shoving it into place again. Then he reaches for the radio and twists the dial, slicing through music and static, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. An orchestra surges up. A female voice like Maman's every Sunday in the choir cutting through the organ's deep hum. Blaise touches the crucifix, thinking maybe it will bring him to God now. Or bring God to him. Because he doesn't feel God anywhere. Every night alone in the dark he presses his hands together and asks God to kill him if He exists so Blaise can at least find relief in knowing everyone he loves will join him in heaven, but every morning he wakes up again, still boiling with uncertainty, still perplexed and alive.

Blaise runs his fingers over the solid bumps and ridges, the pain etched on Christ's face. A piece of heaven, *cette chose*. A family heirloom passed from father to son. Except—

'Your P p re's talk,' Papa says, 'don't let it bother you, eh?'

Except P p re didn't give it to Papa.

'Pauline and Yvonne, they're still too young to know. But they'll find out some day. *Tu comprends?*'

Blaise feels a hot confusion spilling inside him. He straightens in his seat and tries to think of something to say, something to show he understands. 'Like Santa Claus,' he says.

Papa remains silent for a moment. Then he takes his eyes off the road to look at Blaise. '*Oui*, like Santa Claus.'