

Pont del Diable

by Aga Maksimowska

The day after Xavi had the horrible thought, he found his mother in the kitchen and lectured her about the badness of Canada. He never used to look for her in the kitchen, but since all of Spain was getting fired left, right, and centre, it was as good a place to look as the terrace, the prized outdoor space where Núria did her marking and sunbathing.

He stood in the kitchen, stabbing the air between them with a bandaged finger, the X-Men Band-Aid his father mailed from the Québécois village, a flash of colour in a medicinally pastel kitchen. “Do you know that in Toronto kids get killed with guns,” he said. “Kids on bicycles! Something bad can happen!” He counted on his mother not knowing that the Québécois village and Toronto are farther away from one another than Tarragona is from Bilbao.

“Something bad has already happened,” Núria said without turning away from the sink. “That’s why he’s there.” She turned off the water. With his good eye he could see bright t-shirts and shorts rotating in the washing machine beside the sink, twisting wet bodies, a school bus of children careening down a hill. Xavi knew it was a matter of time before the therapist his mother sent him to gave a name to the morbid images overwhelming his twelve-year-old head in times of stress. He named everything else. The patches that started appearing all over Xavi’s skin (Vitiligo), his father’s emotional condition (Homosexuality), his parents’ unorthodox relationship (Platonic), Spain’s problems (Recession).

His father had written: X-Men for my X-Man, in English. Band-Aids and a Cyclops birthday card, as if he was psychic or something. It was odd to see his father, as if in the flesh, through the ink of his pen, sharp peaks and valleys embossed into the cardstock with an adamant hand. Doctor’s handwriting, his grandmother said, even though he wasn’t a doctor. His father preferred writing emails to letters, but since no emails had come in a while, Xavi opened the card and touched the letters within often.

“You didn’t even cut yourself there,” Núria said, and finally turned around, but only to shoot a disapproving glance toward the Band-Aid. “When you cut yourself, there will be none left to cheer you up.”

Xavi withdrew the finger and dunked it into the pocket of his shorts. He wasn’t sure how cheerful disaster-prone mutants were. His mother said *when* instead of *if* he cuts himself. Maybe this was the dawn of the new age that the therapist talked about during Xavi’s first session. He didn’t want to have to see him again.

His mother was an all-knowing jerk sometimes, with or without her business. No wonder no one wanted to go to her school anymore.

When Núria retreated onto the terrace with a tray of surgical tools and nail polish bottles, Xavi fled. The emergency-room doctor the day before strictly forbade all physical activity, but Xavi wasn’t a baby. He had had concussions before; he knew to wear his mother’s Paco Rabanne sunglasses. So he took his amazing mountain bike—a pre-trip present from his father, a gesture that was supposed to mellow the sting of having to work abroad for six months—and rode all the way to Pont del Diable. At the start of the fourth month of father’s absence, the sting was becoming more pronounced. The only thing that was mellowing was his memory of his dad. Xavi

wanted to bash his stupid head into the Roman aqueduct when he got there for being such a shit-for-brains. Hurt himself instead of letting other people hurt him. Who forgets what his father looks like, even if it had already been four months?

The day the horrible thought came to him started with Xavi at the school library watching science videos on YouTube. After her English school went bankrupt, Núria cut off the satellite TV and Internet

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at home; Xavi spent much more time at his, despite the ever-present danger. He didn't ask about "bankrupt" because he knew it meant you had to hand over your money to someone else who played the game, someone who was usually a cheater or a bully, like his cousin Isa when they played Monopoly.

After watching a couple Repsol promotional videos starring Fermin Cerón, brilliant scientist and Xavi's father, Xavi navigated to his favourite science site. He fancied himself a bit of a scientist; it was in his blood, after all. His father was brave, working for the nation's largest oil and gas company, managing disasters all over the world; Xavi was scared of everything, especially travelling abroad. He hoped to work one day for the fisheries department, protecting Spain's cephalopods from imminent doom.

He watched one octopus video seven times in a row. The octopus appeared out of nowhere, a white apparition amidst mossy green coral. Its snout was like a Pocoyo cartoon, black googly eyes making contact with the camera. The camera hadn't budged. The octopus had been there all along: unseen, invisible, protected from Xavi's snooping eyes by its superpower. One second: ordinary coral. The next: pop! a cephalopod grows out of coral like a bubblegum bubble from puckered lips. It occurred to Xavi in that moment that Catalan is a clever language, assigning the word *pop* to octopus. *Pop* gone, a smoky cloud of ink masking

its escape. The scientist in the video said, "We're behind the eight ball, as it were, if we think the world looks like how we see it." Xavi slid the cursor to the left, replayed those words a few times, until they

grafted themselves onto his brain. The world looks like how we see it.

In Science class that day, cousin Isa sat next to him. He wondered what she wanted: the banker job during their next Monopoly game? Money from his mother—who still wrote cheques for the entire family—so she could buy nauseating One Direction perfume and appear prettier to Jordi? Xavi moved his chair a few centimetres in the opposite direction. Metal legs grating on concrete attracted the teacher's attention.

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Jordi Alvarez, the son of a famous footballer and Tarragona's tabloid train wreck, trapped him from the other side. He put his arm around Xavi and pulled him closer, repeating the metal grinding sound. Isa grinned maliciously.

"Xavier," said the teacher. "You need attention, too? Aren't you Ceróns in the news enough? This'd be a good time for some camouflage, no?"

Xavi had no idea what he was talking about.

Yes, his father had been in the news because of the Canadian railroad disaster, the Spanish equipment malfunctioning, the Québécois village going up in flames. And yes, he got burned a little at ground zero but he was healing now in Canada and he was coming home any day. And yes, his mother's was one of the best English-language schools in Catalonia and it shut down and she had a dozen mouths to feed between her parents and his father's parents and her siblings and Xavi's cousins. And yes, yes, their divorce was weird because they still loved each other and hugged all the time even though his father lived back in Bilbao again. "But Jordi Alvarez's dad's a criminal who fucked a fourteen-year-old at a La Liga party, so what's the big deal about the Ceróns?"

Isa's eyes popped right out of her head and Jordi's face was red dynamite ready to explode.

"I said that last part out loud," Xavi said.

Isa nodded, her lips parting.

Thirty pairs of eyes were on him like a floodlight.

"Liar," Jordi screeched.

As he was about to look over at the teacher, Xavi's face met with a hard surface and his whole body tumbled from the science-lab stool like a tipped pumpkin. The concrete floor was murder under his head. The classroom was dimming while Jordi was shouting *marieta, marieta*: Your father is a faggot, a big oil puppet. Faggot puppet.

Xavi felt like the puppet as his limp body was strewn on the classroom floor.

He wanted to correct Jordi and say, "Scientist," but too many of Jordi's words landed on his spotted face in a shower of spittle: "I'll tell you who's the criminal: your father is the criminal! A liar who covers up for murderers!"

Before he blacked out, Xavi had the horrible thought. He thought how different the world looked from the floor, with a scrambled brain, and how wrong he had seen it all this time.

Núria and Xavi wait for the Repsol limo in front of their building, Núria chain-smoking, Xavi picking at his eyelashes as if the dressing were still over his left eye. Dead leaves fill the cobblestone sidewalk and more flutter down from the shedding trees above them: shades of brown and red, dried-up blood colours. When the black car appears, Xavi's lungs collapse. He can neither expel nor absorb a breath. He waits for the doors to open and for his father to emerge. Xavi imagines him so badly burned that he resembles a creature from the undiscovered depths of Mariana Trench.

"Minxto," Núria says when he is out. She embraces him.

Xavi watches them hold one another like there was

never any reason for Fermin to be on the news, like he is still living in Tarragona, like there was no oil disaster, like his skin hasn't been camouflaged by all the badness. "You're okay," she says, touching the tight sleeves on his arms, the new bumpy texture of his face, like he didn't have any part in burning down the village. "You're okay," like he's a good man.

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Xavi wonders if maybe his father won't notice him if he stands very still, his white shirt blending into the stucco wall behind him.

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Evening in Neuberghthal

Lynda Toews

Acrylic on canvas

30 in. x 20 in.

