

Jacob McShane

## DETOURS

*“An antisemite claimed that the Jews had caused the war; the reply was: Yes, the Jews and the bicyclists. Why the bicyclists? asks the one. Why the Jews? asks the other.”*

—Hannah Arendt, *Antisemitism*

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*Le Tour De France 1904, Stage 2, Lyon to Marseille*

*2;32 AM in the lavender fields 30km between Lyon & Saint Étienne*

Every now and then, the perpetual motion of the universe rocks the boat a bit too much, and God starts to feel queasy. His mouth, which we call Time, consumes all things and keeps him sated on his endless voyage. But when Time eats too much and the cosmic waters get choppy, God, feeling a painful urgency, scrunches up the muscles in his belly and lets loose a world.

Staring down at what was his breakfast, Henri remembers this story his grandmother used to tell to sooth his stomach. It wasn't true, he knew, but it made him feel better. In the bone broth there's life, in the bile

there's death, and everything outside these two infinities can be abandoned. Women, children, and bicycle races — all can be opted out of. As the other riders pass, and Henri retches in the lavender fields, Monsieur Desgrange, the race director, pulls up in his horseless buggy. He picks up Henri's bicycle and rests it on the car. "Treat her with respect, she's your lover."

"I can't go on. My legs...my head... I'm in too much pain."

Desgrange puts his hand on Henri's shoulder. "My boy, do you realize the gravity of the commitment you've made? You accepted this singular path knowing you couldn't return. You've abdicated your will to me. No, you can't quit. You will hurt but we will make you great. Come, get on your bike. We are healed of suffering only by experiencing it in full."



If young journalist Géo Lefèvre could take photographs in the dark he would capture this powerful moment. *The way the moonlight shines on the long-suffering and stalwart face of Monsieur Desgrange, whose jaw is harder than German steel... the desperation in the boy's big, trusting cow-eyes... a homesick little soldier under the muscular wing of an eagle...*

If he wants his writing to sell, Géo must do away with the wartime language. What readers of *L'Auto-Vélo* want is uncomplicated entertainment — the simulated melodrama of sport, as opposed to the theater of *L'Affaire Dreyfus*. A French artillery officer, Alfred Dreyfus, was wrongfully convicted of passing secrets to the

Germans, but, even though the real culprit is known, Dreyfus is still under house arrest. Why? because Dreyfus, like Géo, is a Jew.

There's always been unthinking intolerance, but Dreyfus awoke this subconscious beast. Mobs, when they heard the news, stormed Jewish shops and assailed Jews in the streets, but the beast's fangs were sharpest in the papers. Calls for Jews to be 'stewed in oil' or to be 'circumcised up to the neck' were circulated by the mob's upper-class instigators, including Géo's bosses at *Le Vélo*. When his identity was found out, Géo was told to 'ask the Rothschild's for a job,' and, after a fierce objection by his editor (one Henri Desgrange), both were sent on their ways. But Monsieur Desgrange, who set the original 24-hour record on the bike, was a stranger neither to endurance nor sponsorship. He founded the competing paper *L'Auto-Vélo*, hired Géo as his journal tender, and, to boost advertising profits, made a new beast to fill the bottomless stomach of public amusement: *Le Tour de France*. Sired by progress, born in conflict, nurtured by nationalism, and forged in iron foundries, the bicycle, raised on dirt and cobbled roads, is the perfect machine for the mania of the moment.



The riders set out from a café in Lyon at midnight, and they're expected in Marseille by sunset. Responsible for fueling themselves, the Garin brothers, originating in that region of the Alps where national identities are rocky, ate 18 chicken cutlets, two kilos of rice, and drank four liters of a champagne and coffee mixture, all in preparation for today's stage. Maurice, despite the wind drag from his handlebar moustache, is favored to win, and has his brother César up front setting a hard pace. Leaving Lyon, the cobblestones turn to

dirt rutted by runoff, and the dull suffering of shoulders, groins, wrists and backs slowly sets in. Their bikes, which are playfully called ‘bone shakers’ because of their rigid wrought-iron frames, wooden wheel rims, and lack of suspension, are more like medieval torture devices, the longer you ride, than a form of transportation. With a dim light illuminating the rugged way, César leads the peloton of 50-some-odd riders, helmetless, with his brother swaggering in his slipstream.

“Take a pull,” he jabs at his rivals, “or are your legs too weak already?”

‘Hippolyte the Terrible’, as Géo calls him, has thighs the size of the Matterhorn and could suffocate the peloton if the oysters in his gut weren’t guffawing.

“Hippo! Hippo! his legs too fat to ride this fast,” sings Maurice as the gradient gradually steepens. “His ass too fat to ride uphill, he’s swill! he’s swill! he has no skill...”

“You macaronis talk too much,” replies Hippolyte, suppressing a burp, “go and bugger your brother, I’ll be in the winner’s circle.”

“You’ll have to murder me first.” As Maurice responds, a fresh-faced rider, new on the scene, unnamed by the press car and unknown in the bunch, slingshots off Hippolyte’s wheel, sparking it out of the saddle, launching his attack up the *Col de la Lavande*. César starts to close it down, but Maurice yells “let him go, it’s just a peasant who want a turn in the spotlight.”

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It is said in the village of Lavande that Julien, the unnamed rider widening his lead, doesn't have his heart in the right place. Since he was a boy, it's been Julien's job to shuttle his family's lavender to the markets in Lyon and Saint Étienne. To and fro up this same mountain and down again, he knows every millimeter, every undulation, and every rut by heart. Finding himself, a disadvantaged farm boy fed not by meat but by vegetable soup, on the level playing field of his home hill, Julien's chance at victory is fleeting and fast-approaching. The lights of Lavande are less than a kilometer away and Julien's heart, which, as rumor has it, is not in his chest but in his pelvis where the bladder ought to be, flutters anxiously against his hip bones. *What if the barricades have been set too soon? or the Garins have bridged the gap?* He looks back and, about a minute behind, sees the headlamps of the peloton, pale beneath the stars. To his left and right rows of pungent purple shrubs wave in the wind. Above, the humid field of constellations brims with ripe flowers, ready to be reaped. *Jupiter passes through the ram; fortune favors the absurd.*

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A strange kind of unity is given to large groups of people by the lives of single individuals. In Lavande, where the tumbledown clay houses, dyed lilac like everything else, are wedged into the uneven hillside, and there's but one lonely road that leaks through, a crowd begins to take form. In the moonlight where there was nothing but a breeze, a phenomenon fills the air, and a few people — first five, then twelve, then twenty — spill out of their homes. Like brooks, babbling with fire in their bellies and on their torches, they combine to form a fierce river, beating against the dam of normal order, ready for the violent discharge. In the service of the boy

with his heart between his legs, these hundred or so farmers have gathered, with upturned feeding troughs and buckets of bent nails, to build a barricade that even the Germans would be delayed by. As Julien approaches, cresting the climb, cowbells ring, praises sing, and stomachs rumble, anxious to do harm.

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“You should head out soon,” says Julien’s eldest sister Heloise, “they sound close.” The flames of the hearth, since their mother died, have only grown stronger, and it is not unusual for Heloise, her twin Eloise and their youngest sister Louise to be up this late tending the caldron and swapping rumors.

“In a second.” Eloise replies after a sip. Wine in Lavande is grown locally from bunco Chardonnay grapes and infused with aromatic lavender. It is also not unusual for the sisters, when they’re up this late, to drain dry several bottles of the heady, light-purple wine. “You’re not coming with?”

“No,” says Heloise, whose husband, Mathieu, is in the field fiddling with that ancient catapult, “too many people, and...”

“And you’re still afraid of being touched?” asks Eloise, in jest since she knows the answer. Eloise, whose pregnant belly is soothed by the strong wine, fears that Mathieu, the married virgin, is dangerously blocked up. She sees the swelling in his pants and knows her own husband tortures Mathieu, while they’re working, with lewd accounts of their bedroom.

“She told me,” Loise chimes in with her pubescent voice, “that a riot is no place for a woman. Can I have more wine?”

“No place for a woman?” Eloise says, pouring all three another glass. “A riot is a feast, and do you really want the men to cook? The sun will rise on corpses if we’re not there tonight,” her heart beats softly in her pelvis, rocking her baby to sleep, “they’re all deranged.”

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“Oi! Oi Mathieu!” Jean yells from the crowded road as he jaunts out into the field to investigate what Mathieu and the kid Jacques are working on. The mayhem is about to begin — mayhem which a pent-up man like Mad Mathieu would be woe to miss. Even in the moonlight, Jean, as he gets closer, can see the bulge in Mathieu trousers. Jacques, a simpleton with a sickly complexion who does nothing but read books in bed most days, holds a light up to the antique killing machine. “What’re you workin’ on?”

Mathieu, without looking up, responds, “Finally fixin’ this damned catapult.”

“It’s been here since the Capetians fought the Saxons,” says Jacques with a grin, “and he thinks it’ll fire if he replaces the ropes. But the wood’s all rotten...”

“Shut your mouth and hold the light closer, it’ll work...” Mathieu barks, adjusting his pants, “oh... it’ll work...tonight...”

Jean, as with most of the rioting villagers, is no stranger to sexual frustration, but this, he thinks, has got to be the most pathetic manifestation he’s ever seen. Jacques is right: the wood of this dingy old machine is so rotten Jean must cover his nose. Even with new ropes, it’ll crumple under the lightest weight, so, he asks, “Why

are you doing this? Julien is nearly here, and the other bicyclists are not far behind. Come and throw a punch or two!”

“Blast that floppy blonde tit and his entire heartless family! I hope I hit him too.”

“He wants to launch manure out of this thing,” Jacques laughs, “if he gets it to fire.”

“But why?” Jean asks, alarmed at Mad Mathieu’s steep and sudden descent. “We’ll all get covered in shit. If you must, why not throw paint? We had a batch go bad today.”

“Bleh! I’d rather be covered in shit than paint! At least shit is noble.” Mathieu bellows as he tightens the final string. “I think your riders are here.”

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Louise and Eloise, with a begrudging Heloise in tow, wobble out of their cottage in time to see Julien, stomping on the pedals with all his might, blistering through the crowded road amid a thunderous roar by the mob. The peloton is close behind, and the rioters, as if the road were a deep cut, rush to clot the gap with their viscous bodies. Louise, with rocks gathered, leads her sisters into the thick black mass of lavender farmers. There is nothing that Heloise fears more than the touch of the unknown. Even her dress gives insufficient security; it is too easy to tear and pierce through to her naked, defenseless skin. The touch of her husband, Mad Mathieu, she fears most of all, yet in the crowd, with flesh thronging to the nervous beat of bloodthirst, she feels oddly at ease — as if her body were no longer her own; as if she were apart of something larger, univocal, unambiguous, even divine. *The voice of God is the voice of the people, she thinks, and that voice is armed with a swift-striking sword.*



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César Garin, who has set a hard pace up the entire way, is ready to pull off and have himself a well-deserved breath. Nearing the summit, he hears a great commotion and, as the quaint village comes into view, he glimpses fans for the first time this stage.

“They’re out for me tonight!” gibes Maurice, sitting second wheel, “they want to witness greatness! Hear that, Hippo? The crowd loves me.”

Hippolyte, at the limits of his stomach’s content, decides he’s had enough with Garin’s ceaseless shit-talk, and sparks an attack of his own.

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The slower speed up the climb has allowed the press car, driven by Géo with Monsieur Desgrange in the passenger seat, to catch up to the tail end of the tight-bunched peloton. From this vantage, with the village but a busy blur ahead, Géo can see a rider has launched and asks, “I think that’s Hippolyte the Terrible making a move!”

Monsieur Desgrange, the silent and abiding type who, like a crude barometer, can sense atmospheric disruptions in his gut, quietly fingers the pistol in his pocket.

“Looks like we’ve got some fans out, Boss. It’s the lavender farmers! Don’t we have a man from here?”

“Yes,” Desgrange responds after a deep and solemn breath “it’s the boy with his heart in his crotch.”

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Hippolyte is the first to hit the nails, but, his heedless determination being that of a water horse, he trucks on, with flat tires, into the crowd until his momentum is consumed, chewed up, and spit back out by the belligerent crowd. The ambush has begun. Hippolyte rams into the wooden barricades, hits the deck, and is seized upon by the mob. His bicycle is picked up and thrown at the less aggressive riders who, at feeling their tires pop, wisely pulled over. But even they would not be left unscathed by the chaos. Rocks, as if the faucet of a meteor shower were turned on high, start to rain down on these other riders. One is struck on the shoulder; another on his helmetless head; a third is left unconscious all together. Perhaps Hippolyte, who's since been sucked deeper into the pitiless mass, wishes it was he who had been knocked out. The kicks of the crowd are unrelenting. Spigots of his blood leak out onto the famers well-worn shoes. Ruptured is his spleen; shattered are his ribs; and pulped is his perseverance.

Maurice, upon seeing Hippolyte go down, is filled with bile, and fights to free his rival from the clutch of the mob. Géo, from the press car at the back of the pack, catches sight of Maurice as he cocks his fist and unleashes onto Jean's artless jaw. The horde attempts to hold him back, but Maurice fights forward as far as he can get until an errant wine bottle strikes him on the temple, sending torrents of blood down his mustached face. César, having been dragged through the nails, is similarly lacerated and is flung onto a heap of broken bicycles. The wooden wheel rims catch fire with ease and, rushing to his aid, the otherwise uninvolved riders, recognizing that this war will only be ended by massacre, fight with a ferocity Géo can only describe as obligatory.

The rocks continue to fall — one with enough force to fracture the plate glass windshield. “We have to do something!” Géo yells, “They’ll kill us all!” The fury of the horde has been fully unleashed, and several were, indeed, shouting “Kill them! Kill them all! They’re friends of Germans and friends of Jews and they must die!” The goal of a barricade, having been achieved, has given way to something larger; something existential. Energy cannot so easily be destroyed, and the anxious beasts inside these humble farmers have been unleashed. Monsieur Desgrange silently slips the pistol into young Géo’s clammy hand, and gestures towards the moon.

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Jacques, having heard the awful noise of battered brains and bloodshed, rushed from Mathieu’s side and buried himself in bed with his treasured Baudelaire: *More corpses than the potter’s field, or late or soon. A graveyard, I, abandoned by the moon.*

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Back in the lavender fields, Mad Mathieu, alone and priapic, pulls the catapult’s ancient lever, but the bucket, loaded with manure, won’t fire. Something must be jammed. Stepping back, he stumbles over a lavender bush. He’s caught by the arm of the catapult and is, just as soon, is sprung into the air with explosive velocity. And — Oh! he soars in the moonlight and everyone cries Oh! Oh! in rapture — Oh! in sweet release — Oh! as he bursts into the scene.

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The first time Géo Lefevre fired a gun he was petrified. Then, as with now, the gun had been slid into his nervous hands by Monsieur Desgrange, who said, “Fire at the pheasants as if they are lies. That is your job as a journalist: to murder myths and massacre false news. Your bullets are the facts and you are a soldier on the side of truth.”

As he pointed Monsieur Desgrange’s pistol well above the mob’s head, taking dead aim at the moon, a voice deep in the crowd yells out, “Look out! He’s got a gun!” Those with sense scurried away, and left the assaulted riders to hemorrhage, but another voice, one that Géo will suffer with so long as his true heart beats, trumpets “He’s a Jew! the Jew has a gun!” The unthinking mob lurches forward. Géo pulls the trigger and out of the humid air falls Mad Mathieu, covering the crowd in cow shit and specks of his lifeless blood.

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Julien, feeling refreshed, descends the other side of the *Col de la Lavande* briskly and with the peace of mind that only long rides can give. His heart, between his legs, has slowed, and he has Time to think: *If they’ve done their job, then I will be the winner of the stage. My name will be in newspaper, and my suffering will not be for nothing. But if they’ve failed, then at least I’m on my bicycle.*