

THE ISAAC DIRECTIVE

PIERRE BORDAGE

TRANSLATED BY
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L'ATALANTE
NANTES

LÉO

“What’s that, Mommy?”

Standing on a chair at the kitchen window, Léo was pointing to a white shape, barely visible through the morning mist. Not quite awake, half-hidden behind a curtain of hair, Élodie just kept stirring her coffee, completely ignoring her son’s question: he asked so many through the course of each day that she had neither the time nor the energy to answer them all.

“Get down off there before you break your neck!”

Léo raised himself up onto his tiptoes and leaned into the windowpane, fogging it up with his breath.

“It looks like an amanita, but for a mushroom, it’s awfully big.”

Three years and five months old, Léo was an endless talker with an incredibly rich vocabulary, as if he thrived on words. His noisy ramblings irritated all the adults who came by the house and kept the number of kids he could call friends down to just one: Baptiste, the autistic six-year-old who lived next door. Élodie had started wondering whether Léo had Asperger’s himself, but tests performed by a child psychologist revealed nothing but “run-of-the-mill precociousness,” meaning only that she would probably have to enroll him in a special school.

The boy stared at his mother until she finally looked up.

“Come see, Mom.”

Surprised by the insistence in his voice, she heaved a sigh and joined him at the window.

“Didn’t I tell you to get down? What is it you’ve spotted this time?”

Looking out in the direction Léo was pointing, she, too, noticed the white form looming up out of the patches of mist: a perfect sphere, it reminded her straight away of the terrifying orb in that old British TV series, *The Prisoner*. Shuddering, she placed a hand on her son’s shoulder and drew him near.

“What is it, Mom?”

“I have no clue.”

“Why don’t we go for a closer look?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea . . .”

Breaking free from his mother’s arms, Léo hopped down from the chair and darted out the door, left ajar so that Pajamas, a mangy old neighborhood cat, could slip in and fill the house with his purring.

“Get back here!”

Quick as a squirrel, Léo was already making his way across the stone patio that took up half their yard. Beyond the lane bordering the laurel hedge, stretched an unplowed field, surrounded by metal fencing. There was never much traffic in the area, but Élodie couldn’t shake the fear that a car might one day mow down her son, her only love in all the world since having closed the door on relationships with men. Just thirty-six years old—attractive in the words of her girlfriends and ex-lovers, still mindful of her figure,

her legs waxed, her nails carefully manicured—and yet there she was, already walled up in her disappointments.

“Come back, Léo!”

She cinched her bathrobe around her, kicked off her slippers, started after him, tripped on the doorstep, and sprawled headfirst onto the patio’s stone pavers.

“What a klutz!”

Ignoring the pain in her right foot and left knee, she got back up and, hobbling off in full pursuit, spotted her son’s silhouette slipping out the half-open metal gate leading to the road. The roar of an engine fanned the flames of her fear.

“Get back here this instant!”

Quickening her pace, she, too, then rushed through the open gate. On the other side of the road, Léo was already squeezing through two fence wires. A white car appeared and zoomed along the hedge, then vanished around the right-angle turn thirty yards further.

“Did you hear what I said?”

Léo was running lickety-split through the field’s wet grass, making a beeline for the white sphere. Élodie had the distinct impression that it had suddenly grown larger, as if inflated by a gigantic internal pump. A sense of impending doom gripped her. She crossed the road. She stepped with her bare feet onto the embankment’s lush grass. She had trouble getting through the wires of the fence. She had to tighten her bathrobe around her yet again when finally in the field, for she had nothing on underneath. She shivered from the cold, from her anger, from her fear. The pain from her scraped knee radiated up her leg.

“Get back here right now before I lose my cool!”

Lose her cool with Léo? That was something she simply could not do: he had only to throw her a glance, a smile, a funny face, and she was putty in his hands. The child psychologist had told her to be firm but calm with her son, yet each time she gave him an order or told him he couldn’t have something he wanted, she was so overcome with guilt that she always wound up giving in to his every whim. She pretended not to notice how her girlfriends, who held strong views on how children should be raised, threw her exasperated glances, and scrunched up their faces in disapproval.

Léo, vanishing from time to time behind a bush or boulder, was now dangerously near the white orb. She fought back a growing sense of being caught up in some nightmare scenario. The cold morning air stung her feet, climbed her legs, numbed her belly. She would be late for work. By the time she jumped into the shower, got dressed, dressed Léo, buckled him into the car, dropped him off at day care, sat in traffic on the bypass, and located an open parking spot in the company lot, it would be well past her fateful 8:30 starting time, ensuring that she would receive a humiliating reprimand from her boss, a fellow with a shiny bald head, sweaty palms, and lascivious eyes.

Dang it all.

“Léo!”

She was gaining on him. Intent on reaching his destination, he never once looked back. The sphere was still growing, as if, by expanding, it were trying to get closer to the child. It resembled a giant plastic soccer ball. Its surface had no bumps or indentations. Instead of avoiding rocks and other obstacles in its path, it simply absorbed them, as if they had no substance whatsoever.

A thicket of russet leaves vanished right before Élodie’s eyes.

She was now within ten yards of Léo. She reached out her arm to grab him. Her anxiousness turned to rage, blind rage. A terrible urge to whip his hide. But just as she was about to seize him, her foot sank into a hole and gave way. She lost her balance and

tumbled onto the wet grass. Her bathrobe flew open as she fell. The damp, cold grass stung her belly, buttocks, and back. She howled in anger. A sense that someone was there, though, made her spring back to her feet and wrap her robe back around her. She gasped in horror upon seeing the sphere's convex wall right next to her, reaching nearly sixty feet into the air.

"Léo!"

She looked all around but saw no signs of her son.

"Léo?"

She took a few steps back for a better view. He was nowhere to be found, neither in the tall grass nor amid the large, round boulders, covered in brown moss. She fought back a first panic attack. He must have gone to the sphere's far side. She decided to make her way around it, carefully keeping her distance. Something evil emanated from that white sphere, lying there in the grass like a soccer ball the Titans left behind.

Élodie's blood ran cold upon seeing that her son wasn't on the other side, either.

"Don't hide from me, my little angel, Mama's worried sick. Please!"

Tears welled up in her eyes. Although the thought, that one unthinkable but unavoidable thought now brewed within her, she continued to comb the pasture, walking in ever-larger circles while shouting Léo's name, impervious to that November morn's cold, damp air. When, broken hearted, she finally conceded that her initial motherly instincts were right, she walked back over to the sphere: that hideous thing had swallowed her son, just as she had seen it gobble up shrubs and boulders! She had no choice but to join him on the other side of its smooth, white wall.

She walked right up to the sphere, expecting to see it expand and absorb her, too.

"Give me back my son!"

The scream had sprung from her womb with the force of a geyser. The sphere didn't budge, like a snake with a full belly. Setting aside her fears, Élodie raised her hands and placed them directly on the sphere's surface. Surprised at how soft it was, she then pressed her forehead into its smooth surface. Her tears—silent, stinging—began to flow even more freely: "GIVE ME BACK MY SON!"

She first nudged the sphere with her shoulder, which sank in an inch or two, as if she had struck a mattress. She then pummeled the wall with her fists but could not break the soft membrane open. She would have to puncture it. She hesitated: by the time she had fetched the four-pronged pitchfork that she used to break up her garden soil, the sphere might well have disappeared. She regretted not having slipped her smartphone into her bathrobe pocket upon getting out of bed that morning. She stood there for a long time, not knowing what to do, trembling from despair, fear, and the cold; but then spotted a thick, knotty branch among the grasses. It was pointed at one end. She picked it up, started running, and jabbed it as hard as she could into the sphere's round wall. A jolt of pain shot through her arm and shoulder, as if the force of her blow had been turned back against her. She noticed no rips or marks on the sphere's smooth surface.

"Léo! Léo! Can you hear me?"

No reply. She glanced around the field one last time, hoping against hope that she would suddenly spot her son's silhouette, but the only movement was that of the leaves swaying in the breeze. She had no choice but to go back home and phone for help.

She glared defiantly at the sphere: "You swallowed up my son, why won't you swallow me?"

Her only reply came in the cawing of some passing crows.