

**JACQUES POULIN**



**VOLKSWAGEN BLUES**

Translated by Sheila Fischman

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SHEILA FISCHMAN**



**CORMORANT  
BOOKS**

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*This translation is dedicated  
to the memory of John Goodwin*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

*“We are no longer the heroes of history.”*

— EMMET GROGAN, *RINGOLEVIO*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

I  
~

# JACQUES CARTIER

*He* was wakened by the meowing of a cat.

He sat up in his sleeping bag and drew aside the curtain that covered the back window of the Volkswagen minibus: he saw a tall thin girl in a white nightgown walking barefoot in the grass despite the cold; a black kitten was running behind her.

He tapped on the window, not too hard, and the kitten stopped dead, one paw in the air, then started running again. The girl's hair was as black as coal and plaited into a long braid that hung to the middle of her back.

The man craned his neck and saw that she was heading for the section of the campground that was reserved for tents. He got out of his sleeping bag, pulled on his jeans and a heavy woollen sweater because he was sensitive to the cold, then he opened all the curtains in the old Volks. The sun was rising, and there were patches of fog over the Baie de Gaspé.

He went to the restroom to wash and shave. When he came back there was no one in the tent area; the girl had disappeared. He opened the sliding door of the van and carried his portable gas stove, his tank of propane and his plastic dishes to the picnic table. He prepared orange juice, cornflakes and toast, and boiled enough water for coffee and the dishes. When he'd got to the coffee he rose abruptly from the table and went to get his brother Théo's old postcard from the glove compartment. He propped the card against the marmalade jar and slowly sipped his coffee.

When the man looked up, he saw that the fog had lifted and the Baie de Gaspé was flooded with light. He washed his dishes, then replaced everything in the minibus and slid back the roof.

Before he left, he made his customary three checks: the ice in the fridge, the motor oil, the fan belt. Everything was normal. Mechanically he gave the front tire on the driver's side a kick, then got behind the wheel. He drove out of the campground and turned left: the town of Gaspé was about five kilometres away.

The hill was fairly steep so he had to gear down to third, then to second, and when he reached the top he spotted the tall thin girl walking along the side of the road. She was partly concealed by a huge knapsack with a tubular frame, but he recognized her at once by her very black hair and her bare feet. He deliberately stayed in second longer than necessary, and when she heard the rumbling of the motor, the girl stuck out her left thumb without turning around. He drove past her, stopped the Volks on the shoulder and flashed his emergency lights.

The girl opened the door.

She had a bony face, a dark complexion and very black, slightly slanted eyes. She wore a white cotton dress.

"Bonjour!" she said.

"I'm going to Gaspé," said the man. "It's not very far, but . . ."

He waved her inside.

She shrugged off her knapsack and hoisted it onto the passenger seat. The black kitten emerged from one of the pockets and

climbed up on the back of the seat. He was all black with short hair and blue eyes. He started to explore the van. The man wedged the knapsack between the two seats. The girl got inside, but she left the door of the Volks open. She watched the kitten and waited until he had finished his exploration. Eventually he came and lay in her lap.

“It’s all right,” she said, and shut the door.

The man glanced in the rearview mirror, then started up.

The Volks was very old and covered with rust, but the motor ran well. It was a rebuilt motor. The girl was young. The man adjusted the heat so she would get some warm air on her feet. It was early May.

“Are you going far?” he asked.

“I’ve no idea,” she said. “First I have to go to the Gaspé museum. I know someone there I want to say hello to.”

“I’m going to Gaspé myself, but I don’t know where exactly . . .”

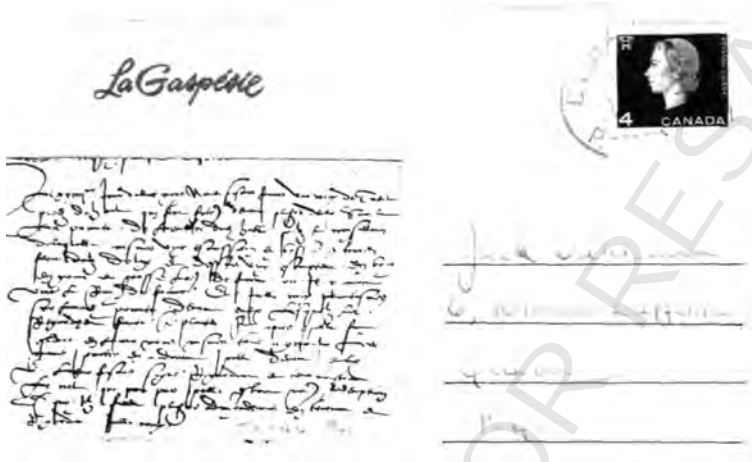
He gestured broadly with his right hand.

“I’m looking for my brother,” he said at last.

He had not seen his brother for a very long time: fifteen years, maybe twenty — he couldn’t remember exactly. The last time he’d seen him was at Mont-Tremblant, where they had watched a car race. Formula Ones. Then his brother had gone on a trip. At first he had sent postcards. He must have been moving around a lot because the cards had come from all sorts of places; one was from Key West, another from James Bay. Then, some years later, he had stopped writing. There had been no word from him. The last postcard was very peculiar and the stamp had been canceled at Gaspé.

“Look in the glove compartment,” he said.

The girl took out the postcard and examined it closely. The man watched out of the corner of his eye to see her reaction. The card showed a typical Gaspé landscape: a small fishing village in the hollow of a cove; the message on the back was totally illegible except for the signature: “*Your brother Théo.*”



Camille Pouliot, *La grande aventure de Jacques Cartier*, p. 42.

“Obviously it’s old handwriting,” said the girl.

“Obviously,” said the man, holding his breath.

“Old texts are always hard to read,” she said very calmly. “Is your brother Théo a historian or something like that?”

“He studied history, but he’s never worked in the field. Or any other field. He didn’t like to work. What he liked was trips and cars. He’d do odd jobs and when he got a bit of money he’d travel.”

The girl smiled faintly.

“And what did he look like?”

“The opposite of me: tall, almost six feet, and his hair was . . . black, like yours, and he wouldn’t work himself into a state over nothing.”

“But, if you don’t mind my asking, why are you looking for him *now*? After all, the postcard’s very old.”

“That’s true. I stuck it in a book and forgot it. I mean, I couldn’t remember what book it was in.”

He thought for a moment.

“Of course that doesn’t answer your question.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

The man was driving the Volks very slowly, in third gear. From time to time he looked in the rearview mirror to see if anyone behind him was getting impatient. Then eventually he stopped by the side of the road and switched off the ignition.

“I turned forty last week and . . .”

He shook his head.

“Actually it has nothing to do with age . . . Some days you feel as if everything’s falling apart . . . inside you and all around you,” he said, searching for the right words. “So then you try to figure out what you can hang on to . . . I thought of my brother. He used to be my best friend. I wondered why I’d stopped hearing from him, and I looked for the last card he’d sent me. And finally I found it. It was in a book with a gold cover called *The Golden Dream*. By Walker Chapman. Have you read it?”

“No,” said the girl.

“Anyway, that’s where I found the card. And since it had been mailed in Gaspé, even though it was a long time ago . . .”

“I understand.”

“Today I feel old and ridiculous.”

The girl resumed her scrutiny of the postcard. She absent-mindedly stroked the head of the kitten, who was asleep in her lap.

“Is your name Jack?” she asked, reading the name and address to the right of the message.

“That’s what my brother used to call me. When we were little we gave ourselves English names; we thought they suited us much better!”

“People call me La Grande Sauterelle. They say it’s because my legs are way too long, like a grasshopper’s.”

She pulled her dress up to her thighs to show him. Her legs really were very long and very thin. Then she turned to the postcard again.

"The last word looks as if it might be *cross*," she said.

She handed him the card.

"You may be right," he said, "but couldn't it be *loss*?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it has five letters."

He started to laugh and she looked at him, uncomprehending.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I think we look like a couple of *zouaves* trying to decipher some old buried treasure map!"

"We are, in a way," she said, her manner still serious. "If your brother has taken the trouble to have an old text printed on a postcard, there must have been a reason. He was sending a message, don't you think?"

She spoke calmly, and it was very pleasant to hear her thinking out loud.

"Unless it's a joke," she added.

"It's hard to know," he said. "Théo didn't do things like other people."

He switched on the motor again.

"If I were you," said the girl, "I'd go to the museum and show this card to the curator."

He turned around to look at her. She still had the same grave, thoughtful expression, but her head was bent to one side because the kitten had climbed up on her shoulder and settled against her neck.

"HERE WE ARE," said La Grande Sauterelle. "Turn left."

Jack turned off the road and parked the old Volks beside the museum. It was a frame structure with several sections arranged in a star. Beyond it, on a sort of platform, stood a group of black metal sculptures that resembled menhirs and bore inscriptions; there was also a tall granite cross that stood at least nine metres high.

They got out of the Volks. The girl left her cat inside, but she

opened a window so he could go outside if he wanted.

“Won’t he get lost?” the man worried.

“No,” she said. “He likes to walk around, but he never goes far.”

In the museum lobby an old woman was washing the floor with a mop and a bucket of water. The young girl approached her and spoke to her in a low voice. Jack walked around the soapy puddles and headed for the information counter, behind which was seated a young man who seemed absorbed in a book.

“Sorry to bother you.”

“Huh?” said the young man, looking up.

“I’d like some information, please.”

“What kind of information?”

“About this,” said Jack, showing him the postcard.

The young man peered at the text for a moment, glanced at the other side of the card, then looked again at the text.

“I don’t understand a word,” he declared.

“I know, but . . .”

“If you already knew, why did you show me the card?” the young man interrupted impatiently.

“It’s old writing.”

“So what?”

Just then La Grande Sauterelle and the cleaning woman came over to the counter. Without raising his voice, the man tried to explain: “I wanted to ask for information about the source of the text . . .”

“I’m not an expert on old texts,” said the young man curtly.

He handed back the postcard with a shrug and returned to his reading. It was a *Superman* comic.

La Grande Sauterelle asked, “Do you know if the curator’s in his office?”

“Who?” asked the young man without looking up.

“The director of the museum.”

“He’s away.”

The cleaning woman tried to look at the card over Jack's shoulder. She was short and plump, and the colour of her skin, as well as her features, showed that she was an Indian.

"May I look?" she asked.

He said nothing, so she wiped her fingers on her white smock and took the card from his hands.

"It looks to me exactly like Jacques Cartier's handwriting," she said.

There was a long moment's silence. When she realized that no one had anything to say, the woman laid the postcard on the counter and returned to the bucket of water she had left in the middle of the lobby.

"Jacques Cartier's handwriting? Why do you say that?" asked the man, who had followed her step by step.

"It's simple," she said. "Your old text is exactly the same as the one in the main hall, and I couldn't be wrong about it because every day when I do the cleaning I have to dust the two placards."

"Two placards? So there are *two* texts?"

"Not at all. It's the same text on both placards, except that on one it's written in old writing like yours and on the other in . . . ordinary writing."

"Would you be so kind as to show us?" he asked briskly.

"Certainly. Come this way, but watch your step."

Jack and the girl followed the cleaning woman into the main hall. They walked along a sort of corridor marked off by parallel cables that snaked past a variety of objects that were scattered on the floor, hung on the wall or exhibited in glass cases: tools, articles of clothing, weapons, transport vehicles, navigational instruments, cards and posters, all arranged in chronological order, from the early days of America to the present time.

At the back of the main hall the cleaning woman stopped in front of two huge posters. She took a cloth from her pocket and automatically dusted them.

"Here it is," she said straightforwardly. They saw at once that

the text on the poster on the left was the same as that on the postcard, and they immediately turned to thank the woman, but she had already gone.

The right-hand poster read: "Excerpt from the original account of Jacques Cartier's first voyage." And the text, in block letters, was as follows:

On the twenty-fourth day of the said month, we had a cross made thirty feet high, which was put together in the presence of a number of the Indians on the point at the entrance to this harbour, under the cross-bar of which we fixed a shield with three fleur-de-lys in relief, and above it a wooden board, engraved in large Gothic characters, where was written long live the King of France. We erected this cross on the point in their presence and they watched it being put together and set up. And when it had been raised in the air, we all knelt down with our hands joined, worshipping it before them; and made signs to them, looking up and pointing towards heaven, that by means of this we had our redemption, at which they showed many marks of admiration, at the same time turning and looking at the cross.

"It's a fine text and I'm glad to have read it," said Jack, "but I don't know if we're much further ahead."

"I think we've made some progress," said La Grande Sauterelle. "Now we have to think a little. Let's go outside for a walk."

They reread Jacques Cartier's text, then slowly left the main hall, stopping here and there to glance at the objects in the exhibition. They paid special attention to a very large and beautiful map of North America on which one could see the vast territory that belonged to France in the mid-eighteenth century, a territory that extended from the Arctic to the Gulf of Mexico and west as far as the Rocky Mountains: it was an astonishing and very

moving sight. But there was also an equally impressive map that depicted North America before the arrival of the whites; the map was strewn with the names of Indian tribes, names the man knew — Cree, Montagnais, Iroquois, Sioux, Cheyenne, Comanche, Apache — but also a large number of names he'd never heard of in his life: Chastacosta, Shuman, Miluk, Waco, Karankawan, Timucuas, Potanos, Yuchi, Coahuitlecan, Pascagoula, Tillamook, Maidu, Possepatuck, Alsea, Chawashas, Susquehanna, Calusa.

The girl stood for a long time in front of the second map. Her eyes were wet and shining, and Jack realized it was best to leave her alone for a moment. He returned to the lobby. The cleaning woman had nearly finished washing the floor. The man shook her hand and thanked her for the information.

"If you want to rest," she said, "you can go and sit in the library. It's the best place to get some peace and there're all sorts of books that talk about Jacques Cartier, if that's what interests you."

"Thanks again, *chère Madame*," he said.

"It's not often people call me that," she said with a broad smile.

"I'm going to get some air, then I'll come back and see the library."

LA GRANDE SAUTERELLE had brought the cat and they walked in silence to the edge of the strip of land that jutted out into the bay.

"Put yourself in Théo's place," she said.

They were in a birch wood, the man's favourite tree. The girl went on. "You come and visit the museum and then, for some reason or other, you get an urge to send a postcard with that account by Jacques Cartier you've just read in the main hall as the message. So what do you do?"

"I buy a postcard at the counter," he said.

"Right. And then?"

"Then I take the text to a printer and ask him to reproduce it

on the postcard, but there's one hitch . . .”

“Obviously you can't bring him the poster from the main hall.”

“Obviously.”

“So.”

He shrugged.

“It's simple,” she said. “You go to the library.”

“Why?”

“To get the book the text is taken from. And when you find it you make a photocopy and you take that to the printer.”

“Sounds logical,” he said.

He gave her a curious look.

“I don't know how you manage to have such clear ideas,” he said. “My head's full of a sort of permanent fog and everything's all muddled up.”

A few minutes later, Jack was in the library. The girl had stopped in the lobby to have a word with the cleaning woman, who was leaving. The library was small but well lit, and it had a large table, upholstered chairs and a card file of titles and authors. The man selected a number of books about Jacques Cartier's voyages and sat at one end of the table to consult them. Through the open door he could see the girl and the woman embracing, talking very softly. The girl was much taller than the woman, but their hair was exactly the same colour.

He skimmed several books and had just found the text by Jacques Cartier when La Grande Sauterelle came in. He showed her the text, which was on page 43 of a book by Joseph-Camille Pouliot, *La Grande Aventure de Jacques Cartier*, with the following note: “Facsimile taken from the original account of Cartier's 1st voyage, containing a description of the erection of a cross in the Baie de Gaspé, 24 July 1534.”

“I like that man Pouliot a lot!” declared the girl.

“He was a judge,” said Jack.

“Well then, thank you, Your Honour!”

She sat at the other end of the table and began to ruminate. Suddenly she stood up.

"I've got an idea," she said cheerfully.

"Another one?"

"We're going to conduct a little experiment, my dear Watson!"

She took the book and led Jack out of the library. At the information counter the young man was drinking a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette.

She placed the open book in front of him.

"I'd like to have a photocopy of the facsimile."

"A photocopy of *what*?"

"This text."

She put her finger on it. He looked very closely at the round, eccentric handwriting of Jacques Cartier.

"Funny, I feel as if I've seen that somewhere . . ."

"You're very observant," she said.

"Thanks," he said. "Unfortunately there's no photocopier in the museum."

"No?"

"No."

"So how do you get photocopies?"

"I have no idea."

She did not despair, but asked, "Are you a student?"

"Yes. Why?"

"There's a photocopier at your school, isn't there?"

"Naturally."

"So what's to stop me from taking out this book and having the photocopy done at your school?"

"Nothing," he said.

He reflected and added, "You can take a book out of the museum as long as you put your name and address in the visitors' book."

"I don't understand," said the girl, a hint of emotion in her voice. "Did you say: 'In the book . . .?'"

“ . . . The visitors’ book,” the young man repeated.

Jack and the girl looked at each other.

The young man took the book from a drawer and, opening it to the page for that day, placed it in front of her without a word.

She wrote her name and address at the spot he pointed to.

“What do you do with the old books, from past years?” she asked him next.

“We keep them,” he said. “We put them in a filing cabinet.”

“Of course. A museum’s intended for keeping old things . . .”

She had leaned her elbows on the counter, right across from him, and now she gave him a radiant smile.

“Could we have a look at the old books, if it’s not too much trouble?”

He seemed to be wondering if she’d lost her mind.