

Maxe, un homme fou

By Toby Frost

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Gather around the camp fire, and I will tell you of how it was long before the space empires, in the Days of Despair. I cannot say how the world government came about, or how it fell, but I can tell you of what followed: the wars, the wasteland, the wine.

And from this wasteland came a man, a broken-down shell of a man, a man whose world was blood and fire and philosophical dissatisfaction. His name was Jean-Pierre Maximilian – but the wasteland knows him as Maxe, un Homme Fou.

The van was a Citroen, of course. It lay on its front like a collapsed elephant, the axles broken under the weight of its former cargo. Someone had daubed an anarchist slogan down the side. Glass covered the road around it, curved green shards set twinkling by the incessant drizzle.

Jean-Pierre Maximilian lowered his binoculars and sighed. The wrecked van was too isolated, too exposed. It could be a trap, as fickle as a woman or a godless universe. But there was no other option. He peered through the windscreen of his car and lit up his second-to-last Gauloises. He was desperate. "To live is to despair," he observed, and he started the engine.

Two cylinders of raw power growled in front of him. He pressed down the accelerator and, with a shudder, the car rolled forward. Maxe flexed his fingers on the steering wheel as he crept towards the ruined truck, his hand ready to lunge for his secret weapon - the big red button mounted on the dashboard.

He saw nothing. Maxe looked left, then right, but nobody moved under the grey sky. He stopped, leaving the engine running, and climbed out.

Maxe hurried to the truck. His leg, still braced from his last encounter with the Soldats de Silence, limited him to a limping jog. Already, he felt their eyes on him.

The driver was dead, long dead. Maxe lurched to the back of the truck and rapped on the rear door with his knuckles. It sounded empty, looted months ago. Muttering, he twisted the handle and yanked it open.

He was right. The van had been stripped. Maxe sighed and reached to the door.

Something caught his eye, a glimmer of light at the front of the van, up against the cab.

He took off his dark glasses and leaned in, putting his head into the rear of the vehicle.

The smell hit him, heady and pungent in the confined space. Wine – spilled and stale, but still wine. It made his mind reel, sent him clambering into the back of the van despite the ache in his braced leg.

A single bottle lay at the front. The looters had missed it. Maxe scrambled forward and grabbed it, turned it round in his hands, saw that the screw-cap was intact and the label still legible. Wine, red as human blood and a million times more valuable.

He heaved himself out, the bottle in his hand. He thought about hiding it up his jumper, but his hands were shaking already. He couldn't risk dropping the precious juice.

They were watching him, there could be no doubt. He glanced around again, expecting to see the black uniforms and pale faces of the Soldats de Silence, but he spotted nobody. He hurried back to his car, opened the door and put the bottle on the front seat. Maxe padded it out – and concealed it – with the striped sleeve ripped from his jumper in his last battle.

He looked back at the van, at the words scrawled along its side.

Someone had written, across the corrugated metal body of the ruined truck, "The essence of existence is futility". Even now, the slogan appalled Maxe. Its wrongness, its bleak acceptance of the end of the world, filled him with existential horror. How could anyone write something so utterly, soul-crushingly incorrect, so immoral in its error? He fetched the paint from the boot of his car and drew a line through the lying words. Under them, he wrote: "The futility of existence is its essence". There. Much better.

Sudden movement at the edge of his vision. Maxe twisted round, grimacing at the pain in his leg.

A man stood twenty yards away, astride a bicycle. Maxe froze, tense.

There were half a dozen flasks, cups and glasses stuffed into the bike's wicker basket: tools for the collection and containment of wine. Maxe did not need to see the markings on the man's face to know that he was looking at one of the Soldats de Silence, the noiseless death of the wastelands.

The man raised a gloved finger and drew it across his pale neck. Then he pulled a sad face, pushed down on the pedal and rode away.

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Hungry eyes scoured the horizon. From his vantage point behind a discarded tyre, Pierre le Pilote scrutinized the road. Beside him, Marc le Mechanique brushed dust off the hollowed-out truck lamp that he wore like a bowler hat. "I need new shoes," Pierre observed. "Without God, can one truly repent?" Marc replied. "Again, my bladder is hurting." Marc clambered up the heap of rubbish, over rotting baguettes and bottles that had once contained pastis. "Do you see him, Pierre?" Pierre pulled his threadbare coat around his wiry body. "No." Marc sighed. "Is Maxe coming?" Pierre shook his head. "Not today." He peered at the tip of his crossbow. "Ah, this bolt is as pointless as existence." Marc shrugged. "Well, better go home, then. See you tomorrow?" "Yes, see you tomorrow." Pierre sat down on a broken lavatory and looked at his shoes. The heel was coming off; he had tied it on with onion-string, and now the shoes reeked of onion. It was undoubtedly a metaphor. From below, Marc called out. "Pierre, look! It's Maxe!" Pierre fumbled out his telescope and put it to his eye. He saw a trail of exhaust, heard the sputtering of an engine... "Marc, quickly, back to the chateau! That engine is air-cooled. It's not Maxe – it's the Uberman!"

*

Maxe saw the chateau from a mile away, a massive white cuboid. It rose out of the ruined architecture of the coast as arrogant as the Englishmen who had once flocked to it from across the channel, thirsty for cheap drink. Now, a ring of abandoned cars served as a primitive fence, their owners long since lost to starvation, bandits or angst. From the top of the fortress, the sign still stood: EASTENDERS. Maxe pressed down on the accelerator and the mighty engine pattered, setting the car rattling around him. The chateau was not home – nowhere was – but there were people within its walls who shared his level of artistic disillusionment.

He tore down the autoroute at a floor-shaking forty kilometres per hour, the bottle of precious wine on the seat beside him. So fast was he going, that he almost missed the crude signpost, made from nailed-together boards, erected on the side of the road.

Scrawled across the board was a simple warning. "You cannot go on. You must not go on. You will not go on."

Maxe went on. Thirty yards further down, he slowed down at the junction of Swann's Way and the Rue D'Awakening. He stopped beside the burned-out shell of a Syndicat D'Initiative and climbed up for a better view. It was always best to check the way these days. Bandits might be lurking in the undergrowth, or might have laid soft cheese across the road to snare the wheels of his car. Even the toughest warrior would stop dead when he drove into a gourda.

He picked up a tourist guide entitled "Ou Est La Plage?" – *Ou indeed?*, Maxe thought – and used it to shield his eyes.

What he saw astonished him. He tried to shrug, but his shoulders would not even move. The chateau was surrounded by vehicles. Most were bicycles, ridden by the Soldats de Silence. Several armoured mopeds lurked around them. But in the centre of the crowd sat a car he had heard of only by its dread reputation.

The car was rounded, the bodywork sprayed black. A single antennae rose like a spike from the centre of the roof. It was the Zarathruster, the battle-wagon of the tyrant of the wastelands and Maxe's arch philosophical enemy.

The door of the car opened, and a massive man emerged. He was nearly seven feet tall, huge in build, and naked apart from gloves, boots and a pair of lederhosen. He gestured to his men, and one of the Soldats rushed over, carrying a megaphone.

The giant raised it to his lips. "Wretched slaves," he bellowed, "it is I, the Uberman. I have come here to affirm life by drinking all your wine!"

A thin voice shouted back from the ramparts. "Take your evil elsewhere, thief!"

The Uberman roared with laughter. "Evil? I am beyond good and evil. Your petty limitations mean nothing to me. Now, let me in!"

"Never!" cried a voice from the ramparts. Maxe recognized Pierre le Pilot, a man cursed with comparatively excessive optimism. "This wine is ours. I stomped those grapes under my own socked feet!"

The Uberman pulled a face. Then he shook his head. Around him, the Soldats shook their fists and struggled to hold back their invisible attack-dogs. “No! Weaklings, we shall return at dawn tomorrow. When I next see you, you will give me all your wine, or I will leave you deader than God!”

As the mighty horde squeaked and pattered away, Maxe climbed down. He would wait until nightfall, and join the defenders. It might give his life meaning for a while.

The gates opened, and Maxe drove his car through. The citizens rushed to greet him, but he could see that the apocalypse had taken its toll on them: their berets were dusty, their baguettes drooping. Maxe stepped out of the vehicle, stretching his legs.

“Mon dieu, what a vehicle!” said Pierre, admiring the huge funnel protruding from the bonnet of Maxe’s car. “The last of the V2 Intercepteurs. But you have arrived at a terrible hour. Les Soldats de Silence have been admiring our wine as if it was the curves of a beautiful woman. Every day, their demands have become ever more outrageous – although still very quiet.”

“I heard the Uberman,” Maxe replied. “It seems that you have only tonight to decide. I can understand your angst.”

A woman spat out her cigarette in contempt. “Rubbish! Nobody can truly comprehend our despair. What do you know of angst, Maxe?”

Maxe shook his head and looked down at his plimsolls. “Quite a lot, actually. Once, I was a normal French philosopher – deeply unhappy and living a meaningless, hollow existence, but not more than most. I had a girlfriend – she was called Claire de Lune – and two poodles, Jules and Jim. But when society broke down, Claire died in a bizarre accordion accident. Then Jules ate Jim.”

Quietly, the woman said, “What happened to Jules?”

“Renegade chefs.”

“Sacre bleu!”

Maxe shook his head. “Cordon bleu, actually. But the end result was similar.”

There was a murmur among the crowd. Several people shrugged sympathetically. But Pierre le Pilot grunted. “We have all suffered, Maxe. But that does not help us now. Come tomorrow, we will all be as brutally stuffed as a goose in pate season. Without wine, our souls will die. For life without wine is as grey and bloodless as an Englishman’s roast dinner.”

“Non!” Maxe snapped back. “We do not have to die – well, not yet, although of course our lives inevitably move towards the grave.”

“Naturellement,” said Pierre, with a certain amount of relief. “It is tragic.”

“Listen. The Uberman is not only a fool, but his misreading of Nietzsche is pitifully simplistic,” Maxe declared. “His philosophy is so weak that if you ask him what is a metaphor, he will tell you that it is for meeting in. Tomorrow, I will fight the Soldats, and defeat the Uberman. I will leave by the back way, and surprise them on the left wing. You must create a distraction. In return, you will pay me seven bottles of wine – one of each pint of blood in my body. And none of the cheap stuff, either. But have courage, my friends. It may be that to live is to despair – but remember, to despair is to *live!*”

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Daybreak. Maxe helped Pierre’s men push L’Intercepteur down the huge drainage tunnel at the rear of the chateau. They went silently, communicating only in battle-mime, until Pierre raised his hand.

“This is it, Maxe,” he whispered. “Ten metres on, and you’re in the Wasteland.”

Maxe said, “I am surprised that the Uberman has never found this entrance.”

Pierre smiled. “I disguised the tunnel.” He pointed to a sign at the end of the pipeline. It

said, *This is not a pipe.*

“Ah,” Maxe observed. “Where would we be without Surrealism?”

“Telephone lobster clock,” Pierre replied, and opened the car door for him.

Maxe tore into the dawn of the wasteland at a brutal forty-six kilometres per hour.

L’Intercepteur shuddered beneath him. He saw the Soldats encamped around the chateau like a medieval army. On top of the chateau, above the gates, Pierre was doing his best to distract the horde. Maxe heard him shout something about a “stupid Arthur king”, but then Pierre’s voice was lost in the roar of Maxe’s engine.

They saw him. The Soldats leaped up. Taken by surprise, they pointed and put their hands over their mouths. But the light was still dim and, without sound, they could hardly communicate.

Maxe flipped the window up, leaned out and flipped his finger up as well. “Looking for this, eh?” he said, banging his fist against the side of the car to demonstrate the fundamental rectitude of his philosophical proposition. Then he pushed the accelerator down and sped off.

The Soldats grabbed their bicycles and gave furious, noiseless chase. Maxe allowed himself a bitter smile, opened the glovebox and took out his last Gauloises. He didn’t have long. On the left, a dark figure appeared, hunched over the handlebars, pedalling madly. Maxe saw a white-gloved hand whirling a string of onions. Maxe swerved, but too slow, and the windscreen cracked as the vegetables burst against it. He grimaced and gripped the wheel. The back of L’Intercepteur shook. Someone had climbed on board.

“Merde,” said Maxe, and with a rip of cloth, hands tore the roof off his car. He glanced behind: like a great pale spider, one of the Soldats clung to the back of the vehicle, a spear-like weapon raised over his head. Maxe twisted in his seat, and a stale baguette flew past and nearly pinned him to the steering wheel. He braked, and the Soldat flew off, hit the ground, rolled, and shook his fist. Maxe grinned and shrugged.

The other riders were closing in and, among them, was the dark shape of the Zarathruster. Maxe’s eyes stung from onion fumes. The ground rumbled under him. Gritting his teeth, he pressed his foot down as low as it would go, and saw the speedometer rise. Both cylinders roared under him. As the bandits closed around L’Intercepteur, penning him in, Maxe’s hand moved towards the red button on the dashboard, and his eyes fixed on the massive funnel rising out of the bonnet.

Not yet, he thought, not yet...

The Ubermann slowed down, and thus braked Zarathruster. The black car was level with Maxe. The Uberman had wound his window down and was shouting something about rejecting weakness. Any moment now, Maxe thought. Just a little bit –

He slammed on the brakes. His enemies shot past him, and suddenly they were directly ahead. Perfectly aligned.

He hit the button. The engine lurched and revved wildly as energy shifted from the wheels to the custom design that Maxe had fitted to his vehicle’s bonnet. Belts whirred, motors jerked into life, pouring power into the huge funnel.

From the end of the funnel blasted the loudest car horn in France. Maxe hammered the red button with his fist, and the horn blared into the Soldats de Silence. Maxe shouted something, but his voice was lost in the cacophony.

The Soldats crashed into one another. The shockwave threw one trooper end over end. Bike wheels whirled at the sky.

“How can we ever repay you, Maxe?” Pierre said. He stood at the open gates of the chateau, watching the Soldats limp off into the distance. They moved slowly and painfully, like someone carrying heavy luggage.

“I ask only that you call me by the informal second person singular pronoun,” Maxe replied. “And that you give me a lot of wine.”

Pierre looked up at the sky. The drizzle had stopped. “We are safe, and we have wine,” he declared. “Now we can celebrate like it is Christmas! Hey, Maxe: perhaps that is what this all is. A metaphor for the season of festivity.”

“Bah. It is a metaphor for life, not just for Christmas,” Max replied. “I must go,” he added, turning to L’Intercepteur. “This place is much too cheerful.”

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As the little car sped off into the distance, the inhabitants of the Chateau de Vin toasted their mysterious friend. Pierre le Pilote felt sad to see the road warrior go, but also happy, because when it came down to it, Maxe was a miserable bugger.

Marc le Mechanique adjusted his bowler hat and sat back on his heap of rubbish. “That was a close one,” he observed. “For a moment, I thought we were going to kick the Beckett. I mean bucket.”

“Now Maxe is famous throughout the wasteland,” Pierre replied. “Whenever people see his car, they will know that danger is coming, like they do when they see a shark in the water.”

“Really?” said Marc, refilling his glass. “And how do people know when a shark is coming?”

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