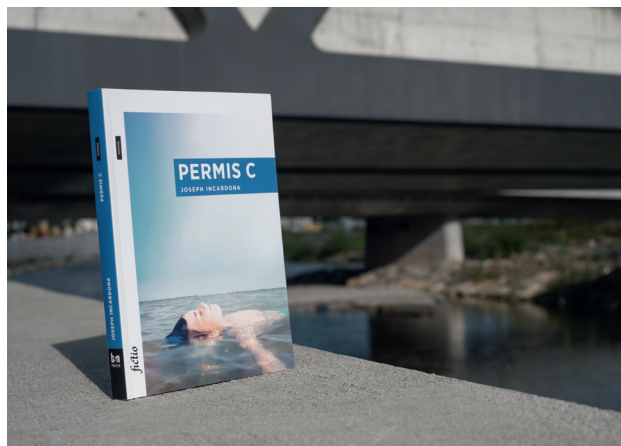


Indefinite Leave to Remain

Joseph Incardona

Novel

French



The narrator looks back on his childhood, as the son of a Swiss mother and Sicilian immigrant father. André struggles with his confused identity and his rootlessness, and only has the macho role model of his father to draw on in the face of the gang violence to which he falls victim. Meanwhile, as he experiences his first sexual longings and encounters, he learns to be a man in more ways than one.

“Although my father had married a Swiss woman, the countless to-ings and fro-ings between the two countries didn’t exactly help our case as regards obtaining the famous Permit C – the settlement permit that everyone pinned their hopes on, the one you needed to become genuinely integrated in Switzerland.”

Title

Permis C

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Joseph Incardona is an author, scriptwriter and producer, of mixed Italian and Swiss origin. He has written ten novels, several theatre texts, screenplays and story-boards for comic books. He is both an unconventional personality and a prolific writer, whose influences include not only his mixed Swiss-Italian background, but also *noir* novels and 20th-century American literature.

Photo: Ekko von Schwichow

Translator

Jackie Smith is a literary translator from French and German, and winner of the Austrian Cultural Forum London Translation Prize 2017. A graduate of Cambridge University, she recently won a place on the *New Books in German* Emerging Translators Programme. Her co-translation of the topical best-seller *The Panama Papers* by B. Obermayer and F. Obermaier was published last year.

Permis C

Joseph Incardona

French original (p. 15–17)

Ma mère s'est assurée que je me sois brossé les dents avant de m'embrasser et de partir faire ses ménages chez des privés. Mon père était déjà au boulot, lui aussi. C'était une période où tout s'imbriquait, des Lego agencés à la va-vite.

Je me suis coiffé, habillé. Sur la table de la cuisine m'attendaient un chocolat chaud et deux tartines au miel. Ma mère avait posé mon nouveau cartable sur une chaise. Enfin, « nouveau » n'était pas vraiment le mot adéquat car le cartable en question avait appartenu au cousin Patrick, mon aîné de quatre ans.

J'ai fermé la porte à double tour, passé ma clé autour du cou et l'ai cachée sous mon pull. Mon cartable était un modèle en carton bouilli et en peau de vache, avec deux catadioptrés orange sur les fermoirs. J'avais insisté toute la semaine auprès de ma mère jusqu'à ce qu'elle cède enfin et demande à sa soeur si elle ne l'avait pas jeté. Rémi, le mari de tante Josiane, était employé de banque. Ça marchait bien pour eux, ils venaient de s'acheter une villa en banlieue. Ma mère rechignait à lui demander quoi que ce soit, mais c'était un cas de force majeure : sans ton cartable en peau de vache, t'étais scolairement mort.

Une fois dehors, j'ai inspiré un bon coup. À chaque pas, j'entendais la trousse rebondir dans mon sac. Une journée claire : le ciel bleu, les oiseaux gazouillant dans les arbres. Mon père était à son nouveau travail depuis l'aube, et moi j'allais à ma nouvelle école.

Je les ai vus après avoir contourné la fontaine en béton. La place se terminait par un goulet qu'il fallait traverser pour rejoindre le préau de l'école. Il n'y avait aucun moyen de les éviter, à moins d'effectuer un long détour derrière les immeubles. L'autre solution était de revenir en arrière, mais je ne voyais pas comment j'aurais pu expliquer à mes parents que j'avais manqué l'école. J'ai continué – mes jambes ont continué –, porté vers un destin tout petit, un de ces petits drames jalonnant le quotidien de l'enfance.

Ils étaient assis sur un muret. Le Chef, un rouquin et un grand maigre aux oreilles décollées. Au moment où je

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Excerpt translated by Jackie Smith (p. 15–17)

My mother made sure I had brushed my teeth, then she gave me a kiss and set off for the private houses where she did the cleaning. My father, too, was already at work. It was a period in which our routines all slotted together, like Lego bricks hastily assembled.

I got dressed, did my hair. There was a hot chocolate and two slices of bread and honey waiting for me on the kitchen table. My mother had left my new schoolbag on a chair. Actually, 'new' was not, strictly speaking, the right word, as this schoolbag had previously belonged to my cousin Patrick, four years my senior.

I double-locked the front door, hung the key around my neck and hid it under my jumper. My schoolbag was the kind made of stiff cardboard and cowhide, with two orange reflectors on the clasps. I had pestered my mother all week until she finally gave in and asked her sister whether she still had it. Aunt Josiane's husband Rémi worked at a bank. Things were going well for them; they had just bought themselves a detached house in the suburbs. My mother was reluctant to ask her for anything, but this was a case of needs must: at school, without a cowhide bag, you were dead meat.

Once outside I inhaled a big breath of air. With each step I could hear my pencil case bouncing up and down inside my bag. A clear day: blue sky, birds chirping in the trees. My father had been at his new workplace since dawn, and I was on my way to my new school.

I saw them as soon as I had rounded the concrete fountain. The square ended in a narrow alley that you had to pass through to reach the school playground. There was no way of avoiding them, short of doing a lengthy detour around the back of the apartment blocks. The other solution was to go back home, but how could I possibly explain to my parents that I had missed school? I walked on – my legs walked on – swept towards my unremarkable fate, one of those everyday mini-dramas that punctuate childhood.

They were perched on a low wall. The Gang Leader, a redhead and a tall skinny guy with sticking-out ears. Just as I was passing in front of them, the Gang Leader

passais devant eux, le Chef a dit :

- Hé, le Rital ! Ramène ta gueule par ici !

Rouquin m'a rejoint et m'a barré le chemin.

- Paraît que t'es un merdeux de Rital à peau de vache, a fait le Chef. Ici, j'ai dit !

Je me suis approché. À côté du Chef, Grand Maigre me fixait tout en se curant le nez. Il en a ressorti une crotte brune qu'il a commencé à rouler entre ses doigts.

- Ton cartable, a dit le Chef.

Sa main a puisé à l'intérieur, il a ouvert la trousse, choisi le plus beau stylo qu'il a mis dans sa poche avant de jeter le reste par terre.

- Tous les autres ont un goûter. Pourquoi t'en as pas, toi ?

Je n'ai rien répondu.

- Peut-être que sa maman n'est pas rentrée de la nuit ? a proposé Rouquin. Peut-être qu'elle suce les saisouns* sur le chantier de l'autoroute ?

Les trois se sont esclaffés. Ils étaient plus âgés que moi, beaucoup plus costauds. On insultait ma mère, et je ne faisais rien.

- Tu sais quoi ? a dit le Chef à Grand Maigre. Tu devrais lui donner ta crotte de nez pour son dix heures.

J'ai compris que ça se gâtait vraiment. Je me mordais l'intérieur des lèvres pour ne pas chialer, larmes d'impuissance et de rage.

- Ramasse ton sac ! a ordonné le Chef. Ramasse-le et viens chercher ton goûter.

Je n'ai pas bougé. Rouquin a voulu me pousser. Je me suis écarté et il a failli perdre l'équilibre. La cloche de l'école s'est mise à sonner, j'arriverais en retard. En même temps, ce n'était pas si important. Je me suis dit qu'il fallait que j'y aille, que je me mette simplement à marcher, et qu'ensuite les choses s'arrangeraient d'elles-mêmes. J'ai pris mon sac, je leur ai tourné le dos et je suis parti.

- Reviens le Rital ! a crié le Chef.

Je m'éloignais et je devinais leur haine grandir derrière moi. Je les ai entendus sauter du muret. Rouquin a attendu les deux autres pour emboîter leurs pas.

C'est alors que je l'ai vu. Un morceau de béton tombé du coin du mur, avec un bout de métal rouillé qui dépass-

spoke:

'Hey you, Greaseball! Get your mug over here!'

Redhead approached me and blocked my path.

'So turns out you're some piece-of-shit Greaseball with a cowhide bag', Gang Leader said. 'Here, I said!'

I drew nearer. Sitting next to Gang Leader, Tall Skinny was looking straight at me, picking his nose. He extracted a brown bogey, which he proceeded to roll between his fingers.

'Your bag', said Gang Leader.

His hand delved inside, he opened the pencil case, picked out the nicest pen and put it in his pocket before throwing the rest of the contents on the ground.

'Everyone else has brought a snack. How come you haven't got one?'

I didn't reply.

'Maybe his mum was out all night?' Redhead suggested. 'Maybe she sucks off the migrant workers on the motorway roadworks?'

The three of them burst out laughing. They were older than me, and much stronger. They were insulting my mother, and I was doing sod all.

'You know what?' Gang Leader said to Tall Skinny. 'You should give him your bogey for his mid-morning snack.'

I could see things were turning bad. I chewed the inside of my lips to stop myself crying, stop the tears of impotence and rage.

'Pick up your bag!' Gang Leader commanded. 'Pick it up and come and collect your snack.'

I didn't budge. Redhead went to push me. I stepped aside and he nearly lost his balance. The school bell started ringing, I was going to be late. Not that it mattered that much. I told myself I had to get going, that I would simply start walking, then everything would sort itself out. I took my bag, turned my back on them and left.

'Come back, Greasehead!' Gang Leader yelled.

As I walked away I could sense their hatred rising behind me. I heard them jump off the wall. Redhead let the other two go in front and followed close behind.

It was then that I saw it. A lump of concrete that had fallen out of the corner of the wall, with a bit of rusty metal protruding. I bent down without turning around. I

sait. Je me suis baissé sans me retourner. Je l'ai senti dans ma main, coupant et compact. Un coin de mur usé qui avait lâché, qui avait attendu tout ce temps que je le ramasse.

Plus loin, les retardataires couraient dans le préau qui se vidait. Dans mon dos, les pas se sont faits hésitants. Je marchais en tenant serré mon caillou de béton, ma main devenait blanche.

- On se reverra, le Rital, a dit le Chef.

J'ai continué en direction de l'école. La cloche s'est tue. Le sang pulsait dans ma tête. Je n'entendais plus rien.

Tout autour, il n'y avait que du silence.

* Nom péjoratif donné aux saisonniers étrangers qui venaient travailler en Suisse.

felt it in my hand, sharp and compact. An old worn-out corner piece that had come loose, that had been lying there all this time waiting for me to pick it up.

Ahead of me, the latecomers were running into the playground, which was now emptying. The footsteps behind me faltered. I was walking along holding my chunk of concrete tightly, my hand turning white.

'We'll be seeing you again, Greasehead', said Gang Leader.

I carried on towards the school. The bell stopped ringing. My blood was pulsing in my head. I couldn't hear a thing anymore.

All around was nothing but silence.