

A journey through Misarchy

An essay to rebuild everything

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Foreword by the translator

A Journey through Misarchy is not strictly speaking advocating for Anarchy.

Still in a Misarchy (i.e., a political system not defined by its opposition to the State, but against power and dominations) a lot of institutions could be appealing to an anarchist: property is strictly limited to usage and life expectancy, all businesses are cooperatives (owned by the workers), the State is dislocated with multiple independent voting chamber pairs (one chamber of elected member and one of randomly drawn members) and various institutions protect the right for self organization of many aspect of one's life.

So I think the collection of political propositions and their interconnection proposed through this journey would be of interest for people who want to see radical changes in how modern societies are organized, an in practice to remove State and Capital domination.

The book was originally published in 2017 and the author has presented it and discussed it on many occasions, including with a lot of anarchist groups or during the yellow vest movements. But in early 2020 there was still no translation in view and thus a voluntary based, collaborative translation was started. The translation was coordinated and performed by Odin Marc with assistance from A. Jouan, G. Gautier, T. Madet, P. Maffre and R. Peyron. C. Brunello is also thanked for her support and encouragement to start and pursue this translation.

It is a non professional translation that likely still contains minor errors or awkward wording, and thus it should be improved. A first part of the text was re-read and corrected with bilingual expertise by Y. Kemlo and H. Sanders who are warmly thanked.

Hopefully corrections and refinements of the rest of the text will come soon, feel free to contact me if you want to help.

Odin Marc,
November 2021, Toulouse.

Prologue

In the past, I would have had to exhibit a savage clad in feathers, a pearl as big as a fist or a marvelous animal with the body of an antelope and the head of a lion. In today's world I would need thick reports with scholarly conclusions full of equations and figures authenticated by the signatures of the best economists and a good communication strategy involving websites, logos, tweets, tags, clips as well as the press, the TV news and the blessings of the business community. Instead, with hesitant hands, I am about to type this obscure testimony on a small computer. I don't even have pictures. Who would even believe me ?

Besides, a thousand witnesses ready to swear under oath and the best evidences would not be enough. At a time when almost nothing seems possible anymore, what I am about to say is truly incredible.

The millennium oscillates between anxiety attacks, authoritarian eruptions and long depressions. In January 2015, when Greece's 'radical' left-wing won the elections, its program was only to regain some of the protections of the 2000s and to negotiate some extensions to payment deadlines. However, it was not the modesty of these ambitions that shocked, but their delirious magnitude. Faced with the European outcry, the Greeks quickly had to fall back on more 'realistic' solutions. Desperate or despairing times?

Today, the greatest battles are simply about avoiding the worst. And only the past seems possible. Fighting for more migrants (as in the 1960s) or fewer migrants (as in the 1940s); fighting for more worker protection (as in the early 1980s), or less worker protection (as in the early 20th century), more welfare states (as in the Scandinavian countries of the 1990s) or less (as in the post-Thatcher United Kingdom). The struggles are very present, but they just push the same wheel one way or the other. They don't dare to take, or even think of, other directions. Only a few excited people demand more, but it is generally while hoping for ethnic purifications or the caliphate of the 7th and 8th centuries. Imagination is cultivated only by a handful of night owls, who hang out in public squares or camp in deferred development areas, without quite believing in it.

The reasonable politician deplures these slight disorders and remains calm. He reminds us pedagogically of the science of curves, polls and experience in the field. Skillful, he discreetly gives in to the main pressure groups. Subtle, he covers his dusty ideas with syrupy amalgams and increasingly explicit xenophobia.

The flourishing political creativity of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries seems to have been lost. It is true that in those times, the world was still to be discovered. Elsewhere existed, geographical societies were shrouded in smoke, veils and spices. And everything was possible. Orangutans were mysterious men of the woods. There were, perhaps, furry fish. And some man-eating sorcerers, in golden palaces, were sipping elixirs of youth. That tingling went out. In the era of satellites, no more terra incognita, no more elsewhere. In a world unified by fashionable technologies and ISO standards, one sidestep is enough to lose credibility.

Yet I am not the first to have seen and experienced the Arcanian misarchy. This country is open. Many people pass through, come and go. And many writings have already tried to convince my contemporaries of this or that possible progress, inspired by the work of its inhabitants. Several complete testimonies would even have already been written and would have been lost. But it is as if one only had to write 'misarchy', 'Arcania' or 'Nehushtân', to trigger the superior, half-joking, half-weary smile that accompanies the trashing.

Unless we have a naive reader? Or half-awake while picketing? Maybe a child? To that person, I want to say that I'm not crazy and, for that matter, I really have no imagination. The following exists and works. It's nothing else than truth.

My name is Sébastien Debourg. I was born in 1972 and am a professor of law at the University of Cergy-Pontoise in France, specializing in international financial law. I have painstakingly acquired a solid reputation for rigor, precision and seriousness, which I am about to throw away definitively.

In the course of my work, I have had to go all over the world, to teach, give lectures and participate in conferences. The last World Congress on Stock Exchange Law was held in Sydney, Australia. And of course, I had planned to attend. For me, this faraway destination was a bonanza: it was an unexpected opportunity to travel around the world with a few tourist stopovers while having my university foot most of the travel costs. I had given myself three full months. With my passport covered with visas, my skin all pricked with vaccines and an optimistic box of condoms in my bag, I embarked at the beginning of the summer.

I never made it to Sydney.

This is easily verifiable to all as the list of participants for this congress is public and available on the Internet. And I'm not on it. And that got me into a lot of trouble upon my return. My colleagues had waited for me in vain. Mockingly, they were hoping for some juicy anecdotes. Much less understanding, my family was waiting for a confession. I had no ready answer for either family or colleagues. I became entangled in contradictory explanations. The only thing everyone seemed to agree upon was in imagining some sort of adultery. And since it was the only part of my adventures that was both true and credible, I clung to it. I just made up something: a romantic adventure and three months in the Bahamas. My wife left me, my children no longer see me. I was so afraid I would look like a fool or, worse, an idiot.

After all these silences and lies, it is with some relief that I set about writing this testimony.

To this day, I still wake up at night covered in sweat, dazed, remembering the shock. The plane, an aging DC9, was fortunately more than half empty. There must have been about 50 people, including the two pilots and two crew members.

I still don't know exactly what happened. I only remember a few images, but they keep coming back. There was this violent storm, these tremors. I'm not afraid of flying. But a stewardess suddenly entered a terrible state of panic. She had a look of fear in her eyes and she started crying. Her colleague squeezed her shoulder violently, whispering something very articulate in her ear — something no one could hear. Seeing that, I thought she knew something and I became

shaky. Everything went very quickly after that. With the first shock, I felt as if half the plane had been ripped off. The passenger next to me screamed at the top of her lungs, but her scream was drowned out by the din of the twisted metal sheets. Then silence fell on me, even while all around me people were screaming. It took me a few moments to understand that I was no longer hearing anything, as if I had gone deaf. I became aware of a hard object in my mouth, a taste of blood, a pain in my wrist. I realized that I was alive and that everything was still. I decided to stop moving. A woman in a torn uniform came to talk to me. I didn't understand anything. Making signs with her hands, she asked me if I was all right. I answered by nodding. She showed me the way out, rather insistently. I managed, not without discomfort, to unbuckle my belt and get out of my seat.

The plane had landed on its belly, along the side of a hill. The wing on the upstream side had been torn off, but the body of the aircraft was largely preserved. Sounds were coming back to me little by little and the pain in my wrist had already started to subside. I helped around a little, like an obedient automaton. Miraculously, most of us were practically unharmed. Only three of us were seriously injured, of which one was really nasty to look at.

We were in a dry country. The rocky outcrop revealed a short and bushy vegetation which allowed the eye to look far away. The wind was light and the weather mild. But everything seemed empty. It was impossible to see the slightest trace of human presence. A few tall trees, strange and majestic, punctuated the hilly terrain. They were of a species completely unknown to me. A thin, shiny bark covered their long, tortuous, vaguely Chinese branches. Small balls of gray leaves clung to them like parasites. These indisputably alien trees forbade any sense of calm.

A camp was set up about 100 yards from the wreck. Rocks were exposed everywhere and there were no flat areas to lie down comfortably.

The captain sat against a tree, staring blankly into space into a wave. He hasn't said a word since the accident. The second in command was compensating. He was a tall guy with sparse hair but a willing chin, constantly out of breath, like a footballer being interviewed on the spot right after a game. Hyperactive, he went from one person to another, asking again and again if everyone was ok, trying to reassure everyone: "Help will come." "Maybe in the night." "We need to stay calm, brave." He distributed meal-trays: "Everything is going to be fine.", "We have to hold on."

Hours went by, heavy, motionless. Passengers dozed or exchanged their fears in a low voice. The condition of the wounded seemed to be getting worse. I glided towards the food stocks, in order to judge the situation. There was only enough food to provide one meal, maybe two by rationing. We weren't going to last long. Something needed to be done. I sought the second in command and asked him if anyone had left in search of help. He told me it was completely useless, that we were lost far from any inhabited area and that we just had to wait for help. I asked him what help he was awaiting, and how he could know if they would come. And when? He assured me that the black box was transmitting, that I needed to reassure myself and wait. I told him that we couldn't just sit there, waiting stupidly. He replied that all civil aviation manuals order survivors to stay close to the wreckage. I explained to him bluntly that I wrote manuals myself, that I knew their limitations and that you had to be able to adapt to the circumstances. He ordered me to calm down and stay put. I sharply retorted to him that I was an associate professor in law school and that no second-in-command was going to give me any orders. He had a look of resentment and a gesture of renunciation. I had the upper hand. I ran into some of the survivors and told them not to worry and that I would soon be back with help. I paid no

attention to their dubious and resigned faces. I authoritatively took the contents of a meal tray and two small bottles of mineral water. I placed them in a small apple-green backpack found near the wreck. I made sure that I had my wallet and my cellphone (an elegant, state-of-the-art smartphone, impeccable and reassuring) and set off.

After several hours of walking, the landscape had become steeper and more rugged. The vegetation was now too tall and dense to be seen from afar. Fortunately, I crossed some scree slopes. They made my progression harder, especially since my shoes were not adapted in the slightest, but these landslides devoid of vegetation offered clear views. Each time, I scanned the horizon at length, full of hope. I saw forests, a few barren patches, rocks, scrubland, but nothing to point me in any direction — no crops, no buildings, no roads, not even a path.

I started to have doubts, and even thought of retracing my steps. But the thought of the second-in-command wearing a triumphant grin on his face dissuaded me. I kept going. The effort made me thirsty and my little bottles of water were quickly drunk. I was foolish to take so little with me. Luckily, I crossed a small muddy stream. It was impossible to know if it was drinkable or not, but I quenched my thirst there and even filled my bottles.

I felt dirty and sticky. I felt like I was dripping with dirt and my crotch was burning. To get my strength back, I swallowed my lunch tray at once. But I felt all kinds of back and stomach pains. I was now sure that the water I drank was poisonous. My God, what had I done? I had to go back. So much for the mocking. I started heading back to the wreckage. But realized I was no longer sure of where I had come from.

I suddenly had a bright, obvious idea. I took out my cell phone and turned it on. Miraculously, it still had battery, just a bit. All I would have needed was some signal, but there was none. What did I expect? I moved around a bit, with my eyes desperately staring at the screen, waiting for a signal. Nothing. Nothing at all... I walked in all directions, looking for a clearer, higher place, until the last trace of energy ran out and my phone shut down, definitively. I realized I hadn't even thought to bring my charger.

I tried to walk straight ahead, one step at a time, maintaining the same direction. The daylight was fading. I felt that I would never make it. I reached the top of a small mound. I couldn't see very far, but still see far enough. Still, in the distance, those big strange trees, limestone rocks and, in the hollows, small inextricable forests. It was a wild, brutal, totally empty country. I didn't even come across any animals. If I wanted to survive, I would have to try the strange berries and mushrooms seen here and there. I could only hope I wouldn't run into the poisonous ones right away. I sat down and tried to chew some grass. It was bitter and a bit of dirt crunched under my teeth. Exhausted, I started looking for a shelter to sleep.

Suddenly, I saw a little smoke in the distance. I stared at it with my mouth ajar, like an idiot. It rose straight up over a forest. It was almost too good to be true. Probably a campfire! Someone... Unless it was the wreckage I had failed to get away from. My heart jumped and I got a violent burst of adrenaline. I felt an energy, a vigor flowing through me that I hadn't thought I was capable of anymore. It was with a brisk step, almost running, that I moved towards this smoke.

Night came, but the gods were with me. The moon was almost full and no clouds darkened it, leaving the landscape almost as clear as in daylight. I rushed into the woods, straight towards the smoke. I lost sight of it but tried to keep my direction. A hole in the trees allowed me to see that

thin, gray thread of hope that rose into the sky. I remembered that the plane was far from any forest, so that it must be something else. Maybe a camp, a hunters' shelter... Once again, I was forced to go deep into the woods, which made me lose track of the smoke. I was afraid I would never see it again. These campers could fall asleep and the fire would go out. I sped up in spite of the forest that was getting denser and thornier.

Just when I thought I was stuck, I came to a clearing. In the lunar light, long gray and blue grasses undulated in the wind and beat against the almost black rocks that stood here and there. I let myself be carried away by this flow of vegetation in the widening gap.

A little further on, a few tufts of grass were laid down, flattened, perhaps by a storm. The crushed grass formed a kind of path. I realized that it could be an animal track and I hastened to follow this sign of life. A curious smell, foul but familiar, attracted my attention. I looked for the source as if by reflex and found a large, good old patch of cow dung. I got all excited, but calmed myself down. In this country, there could be yaks running loose or powerful zebus... I went on, with my heart beating fast when, just behind a big bunch of trees, a small sheepfold appeared, made of old stones. It was barely two hundred meters away, and the thread of smoke that guided me here was escaping from its chimney. I fell to my knees, crying. I was saved!

I blew and coughed my lungs out. I had an overwhelming urge to lie down and fall asleep right there, right then. The damp, icy ground repelled me, and I got up again. A few more staggering steps and I knocked on the door.

Contact

While someone tried (unsuccessfully) to explain to me the value of abstention, I learned new words, such as ‘misarchy’ and ‘extec’, and I got tempted by an optional sadomasochistic code.

A black woman, about sixty-five years old, came to open the door. She was wearing a long dress made of rough, worn-out canvas, whose faded floral pattern was hardly noticeable anymore. Her haughty head carriage was in contrast with the misery of her attire. In spite of her face ravined by deep wrinkles, one could guess that she had undoubtedly been, in her youth, a very beautiful woman. I tried to greet this apparition in Spanish, in English... She answered me in perfect French, with a barely guttural accent. Seeing my surprise, she smiled at me. What luck! A French-speaking woman here, far from everything, at the other end of the world! She seemed appalled by my condition and immediately opened the door and let me in.

The dwelling consisted of a single room of about four by three meters. On a wood-burning stove, something was simmering in a dented cast iron pot, giving off a pungent smell of smoke and caramelized stew which made me swallow with envy. An oversized bed took up almost half the room, where two teenage boys were lying. One had placed his head on the other’s chest and was letting his hair be stroked. Both looked at me, amused. Their skin was very white and I deduced that the old black woman may have been some kind of nanny. I just stood there, blowing my breath, unable to find the right words.

With a squeeze on the shoulder, the woman made me sit at the table. She brought me a jug of water, a piece of black bread and a bowl filled with a hot, thick, brownish substance from the pot. She told me to eat and drink. I was very thirsty but she hadn’t brought me a glass. Making do, I drank plentifully straight from the jug. The approving glance of my hostess encouraged me. I gobbled a mouthful of the mixture she brought me. Stringy, it had a strong, slightly gamy flavor, but it was hot and I shivered with pleasure while swallowing it. At the same time, I thought that I would never be able to digest it.

By the second mouthful, I remembered where I had come from. I talked about the accident, about the need to find help... I stopped after every sentence to eat and drink. I asked how many days’ walk we were from a village where there would be a telephone. The woman looked at me worriedly, but she seemed to understand.

She rummaged through some sort of a crude blackwood chest of drawers. If she had drawn a magic wand out of it, I wouldn’t have been surprised. But what she came up with defied imagination. It was a kind of smartphone, slightly curved towards the center, very thin and elegant in its thin aluminum shell. She tapped on the touch screen, and before I had time to stammer a word (I was in shock), she started a phone conversation in fluent Spanish. I had a reasonable understanding of the language, which allowed me to follow. She summed up the situation calmly. Her clear answers seemed to be addressed to a very professional interlocutor. This miserable peasant woman, dressed in dirty rags, turned out to be curiously bilingual and connected.

Linguistics and misarchy

When the phone call was over, I congratulated the old woman for her knowledge of languages which had amazed me.

"You know, I'm just a poor woman," she told me. "Apart from French, Spanish, English and a little literary Arabic..."

"Still, it's impressive," I said surprised. "And what is your mother tongue?"

"What do you mean? Do you mean in which language I would talk to my children?"

"I am asking about the national, official language in your country."

"National'? 'Official'?" She didn't seem to understand.

"Which one does the administration use?"

"'Administration'?" she asked me again, embarrassed.

Her mastery of French appeared to have its limits. Articulating, I insisted:

"What is the main language?"

She paused thinking for a while, then she answered that she wasn't sure. She explained to me:

"It is hard to say. Mandarin and Wolof are spreading... For sure, French is rarer today than it was in my youth. I would say that the most widespread language is English... or Spanish."

She really didn't know what the official language of her country was. Despite her telephone, despite her mastery of several languages, this poor woman seemed to suffer from a certain cultural isolation. I thought it better to simplify my questions:

"You should be able to tell me where we are," I asked. "In which country?"

As if reassured, she nodded and told me that I was on the western border of the Arcanian misarchy. Facing my wide-opened, questioning eyes, she added:

"Arcania, that's how we call the region we're in."

That name didn't ring a bell. I insisted:

"And 'misarchy'?"

"You don't know what it means?" the old lady asked me in amazement.

I waved my hands to signal that I didn't. The two teenagers lying on the bed seemed to be amused by my ignorance and puffed, whispering to each other. The old lady gave them a stern look and turned to me:

"'Misarchy' is a word built on the roots 'mis' and 'archy'. 'Mis' comes from the Greek verb 'misein' which means 'to hate'; as in 'misogyne', that which hates women, or 'misanthrope', that which hates human beings... And 'archy' comes from 'arkos', the leader; as in 'monarchy', a system with only one leader, or 'anarchy', without a leader. Do you know these words?"

"Yes, yes, of course!"

"Then you should understand the word 'misarchy'. This is the regime that 'hates the leaders'. It's very simple. We hate domination, power. We want as much freedom and equality as possible."

"I don't see the connection..."

“Power is an inequality,” she patiently explained. “And it infringes on the freedom of the submitted. So, power undermines both equality and freedom. That’s why we don’t like power and why we try to reduce it. It is to promote both freedom and equality.”

“Us too, in France we stand for freedom and equality,” I said.

“Then you don’t like power either?”

“Well we distrust our leaders... But we respect them too. You see, they’re elected. That gives them legitimacy. In a democracy...”

“‘Democracy’? You’re from a democracy? I’ve heard of democracies, you know! They try to separate and frame powers, correct? Some even call them embryonic, fledgling misarchies.”

“Democracy is not ‘embryonic’, nor ‘fledgling’,” I replied, offended. “It is the most complete and the best of political regimes.”

“I don’t want to clash with your beliefs,” she immediately retreated. “I just wanted to explain. The misarchist regime is more egalitarian and libertarian than your ‘democracy’.”

This poor woman didn’t seem to really have understood what makes the superiority of western democracies. I preferred to focus again on my bowl. The old woman perceived this withdrawal and seemed to accept it. She put her hand on my shoulder, warmly.

The two bedridden, lymphatic teenagers appeared relieved to see that we had finally stopped talking. One of them got out of bed to approach me. He was naked and didn’t seem bothered at all. His delicate body was finely toned. I looked away, but felt him coming straight towards me and I tensed. He caught my gaze, smiled at me and put his hand on my shirt, on my chest. I felt his warmth. His lips parted, I jumped up and took a sharp step back. Nothing of the scene had escaped the woman’s attention. She told him: “Wait a minute, my pretty sweetie, I’ll take care of your little balls. But leave the gentleman alone.” She turned to me and told me to go on eating quietly. She spoke to me slowly, as if I was a bit retarded. As a result, I realized that my mouth was wide open. I pulled myself together, and frowned. I thought about the accident, about the survivors, trying to forget about the teenager. I probably misinterpreted his gesture. I sat down again and took a bite from the black bread.

“I understand your emotion,” the old lady told me, running her hand through her gray hair.

The lecherous teenager didn’t go back to bed, but discreetly placed himself behind her. This nanny seemed completely devoid of authority. I couldn’t imagine what the parents would think if they saw the scene. Especially since the young man just slipped a hand under his nanny’s dress. Without any embarrassment, he caressed her buttocks. I couldn’t believe my eyes, I was in a nightmare! The second teenager had removed the blanket. He stroked his member, which stood up vigorously. The woman seemed captivated by this young sex. She approached it and put it in her mouth, while the second teenager lifted up her dress. He unveiled an ass that was still muscular, despite her age. He shook her buttocks vigorously, then spread them firmly apart, uncovering a purple, wrinkled anal orifice, on which he spat, several times. The black witch was moaning, while he had a hard-on like a madman. I screamed, and the foul trio stopped immediately. They turned and looked at me.

“Did you hurt yourself?” asked the other teenager. I told them I felt like puking. The old woman looked worried, and she asked me if the ‘borlatch’ hadn’t settled with my stomach.

“It’s good meat and good vegetables, though,” she said.

“But... what... what you’re doing to these kids...”, I heard myself answering in a hoarse voice.

She looked at me bewildered. The teenager who was fondling her ass looked at me, puzzled. He shook his head, thought for an instant, then said, apologetically: “Sorry. Of course, you can

join. Wait, I'll get you..." In front of my horrified look, he stopped, stunned. Then he burst into tears. "Phew! He's finally coming to" I told myself mentally. "My God! Poor thing. But what horrors has he suffered to come to this?" The first teenager, the one who was getting his blowjob, stared at me angrily, as if I had just slapped him for no reason. He got out of bed, fists clenched, as if he was going to hit me. The old lady stepped in: "Darling, darling... stop... He's a newcomer..." She was shaking a little, as if under strong emotions. She put her dress back on and started to breathe again. She seemed almost like a normal old peasant woman again. That gave me some courage. I wasn't going to let this degenerate granny and these perverted teenagers persevere in their abjectness.

I talked to the two boys. I told them calmly, but firmly, what I thought of their behavior. I reassured them that I would be there for the night to protect them and that we would leave in search of civilization in the morning. To calm them down, I assured them that they would certainly be able to find a family or a foster home. One of the two teenagers hugged the old lady and didn't stop sobbing. The other one, who was standing next to her, didn't loosen his fists. The witch tried to speak up but I didn't let her confuse those poor spirits any further. I stood up and I silenced her with authority, loudly thudding my fists on the table. She resigned herself. It is true that I have natural authority, and I believed she sensed who I was. I was glad she did and I started organizing the room. I shook that infernal nanny a little and ordered her to go sit in the corner of the room. Then I told the teenagers to sit on the other side, with the blankets of the bed. They pretended to resist, but the old lady insisted that they do as I said. Finally, I lied alone on the bed and watched everyone.

I had to stay awake, alert, but I was no longer sure of why I had to... The light was making me blink. I looked up and found broad daylight. Lord! I had slept through the night.

The room was empty. The old lady and the two teenagers were gone. I remembered pulling them apart, lying down on the bed, but then nothing. What vile morals! I had done everything I could to avoid the worst. But I was really exhausted. Anyway, they were gone. In which direction? I needed to think about it. The stove fire had been out for a long time. I was cold. I went to get the blankets, wrapped myself in them and went back to bed, thinking I would take care of it all later. I fell back asleep.

When I woke up, I had a slight erection and I felt some shame about it. As soon as I would meet the authorities, I would inform them of what was going on in that hovel. How sad, I thought, this misery and its procession of moral decay.

I drank a lot and forced myself to finish the soft, cold pittance left in the dented bowl. I filled my water bottles and put them in my bag with black bread and a piece of bacon found in a cupboard. Finally, I headed out, impatient to leave this place.

The sun was already high. With its white stones, the sheepfold was illuminating a green clearing, strewn with multicolored flowers. I took a few steps, surrounded by swirling butterflies. The charm of the place contrasted so violently with my memories of the day before that I could believe it was nothing more than a bad dream. I saw two good, big, fat dairy cows. This spectacle made me feel a little better, and it was with a rather assured step that I undertook the path deeper into the unknown.

Non-interference principle

After a good hour's walk, I entered a valley in the heart of which a stream flowed. In the distance, below, a small hamlet of white stones was surrounded by beautiful rectangular plots of land bordered by carefully tended hedges. Each plot of land seemed to be destined for a specific function: an orchard, a vast vegetable garden, a sheep pen, a large, a carefully tilled field... A few large, majestic oaks guarded these gardens. And everything appeared to be bathed in an orderly, solid, immutable peace.

I approached cautiously, like a warrior, half-crouched. Every bump in the ground, every grove was a hiding place for me. It was a matter of seeing without being seen, of remaining invisible, stealthy. When I got to about a hundred and fifty meters from the buildings, I slipped under a slightly overhanging hedge. From there, I had an ideal observation post. The buildings were modest in size, with the exception of one of them – imposing, circular and topped by a bell tower. This outward sign of religiosity reassured me a little.

About ten minutes later, a young woman came out of the main building. She was dressed in a long dress of unbleached canvas and was wearing a kerchief that prevented me from seeing her face. She was carrying a hoe on her shoulder. As soon as she arrived in the vegetable garden, she used it with small jerks, to weed and turn over a few clods of greasy soil. Her rhythmic gestures were reminiscent of the healthy rural activity of the last century, reminding me of the red and rough hands of the peasant women of my childhood. No sign of misplaced lustfulness.

She worked on her task fairly briefly and returned to the main building. Two minutes later, five sturdy-looking men came out. Their hair reached down to the middle of their backs, they all had large, bushy beards and were dressed in canvas gowns, similar to the peasant woman's dress. They looked like some kind of monks, although they looked more like big agricultural bullies. To my relief, they went in a direction almost opposite to mine and were soon out of sight.

I stayed there thinking. No suspicious behavior so far. That didn't prove anything, but I couldn't stay under my hedge forever. I could either make myself known to these people, simple and orderly, or continue on my way in search of a hypothetical larger settlement.

My hesitations were interrupted by a rustle of leaves. Then by muffled footsteps. It seemed to be close by. I began to crawl out of my hiding place in order to see where it was coming from. But no sooner had I poked my face outside, I saw the big bearded men approaching from all sides. I was properly surrounded. Their stature as men used to physical labor dissuaded me from trying to flee. The little peasant girl must have seen me and warned them.

One of them was significantly older than the others. His red beard, which was slightly grayish, bushy eyebrows and black eyes called for caution. In a very calm, almost warm voice, he introduced himself:

“Hushai, second prior to our Lady and Mistress the Abbess Clithène. To whom am I speaking?”

“I... Sébastien Debourg, professor at the University of Cergy, uh... Paris... France... Europe?”

“Dear Sébastien, would you like to come over and share a brew with us as a sign of welcome. One of our local specialties. It could be an opportunity to get to know each other better.”

The invitation was all the more difficult to refuse because, despite their friendly looks, my interlocutor’s acolytes had placed themselves all around me. My options were clearly limited and I had to follow these people, willingly or not.

I tried to put on a good face and accepted the proposal with a forced smile. As we set off in the direction of the hamlet, my concerns were confirmed. I was carefully guarded on all sides.

They were taking me to the main building. The door opened into a very large room, about a hundred square meters with at least five meters under the ceiling. Tiled with small terracotta paving stones, it was overhung by an imposing, exposed roof structure. About fifty people of all ages were there. Some read large books with thick pages in small rattan armchairs placed in a circle. Others worked with wood, on tables placed here and there, without me being able to understand their aim. Some more were busy with household chores. Only a large electric chandelier, hanging from the main beam, and a sewing machine in a corner of the room, attested to some modernity. Four women, eyes to the sky, were humming slow repetitive melodies. Across the room, five or six children were also there.

When we walked in, everyone stopped and stared at me blankly. I realized I was considered a curiosity. In the silence, I heard a high-pitched child’s voice saying:

“Mummy, is he the man who hit Granny Sodomite?”

And an offended voice replying to him, “Please shut up!”

Hushai, the man with the red and gray beard who had just captured me, made a soothing sign as he embraced the room with a circular glance. The silence obtained, he declaimed loudly:

“Everything is fine.” He opened his arms, and continued with his face lit up with a big smile: “He is called Sé-bas-tien De-bourg! Let us welcome him with joy!”

Then all the members of the small congregation stood up and, with one voice, they chanted rhythmically:

“Our hearts open for Sébastien Debourg! Our hearts open for Sébastien Debourg!”

Hushai then raised his fists towards the ceiling. A very deep bell sounded twice. I am not very pious myself, but the warmth and the beauty of the place, the attitude of recollection and detachment of each one, these words of welcome, this fervor, the sound of the bell..., all this seemed to me rather reassuring. These people were strange, of course, but they were far, very far from the totally unstructured behavior of the old nanny.

There was a young woman at the back of the room, standing on a chair. Until then, I hadn’t noticed her. She had long black hair tied in a ponytail and looked to be about twenty-five years old. Her dress was the same as the others, except for a thin green star embroidered on her chest. She had bright, feverish eyes that plunged into mine. The silence was total. With a height and dignity almost incongruous in such a young woman, she blessed me with a sign of the cross followed by a semicircle, then pronounced in a strong, well posed voice:

“*Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.*”

As soon as these words were uttered, everyone resumed their activities, without paying any more attention to me. I couldn’t take my eyes off the young priestess (I imagined she must be something like that). She hadn’t taken her eyes off me either. I even had the fugitive impression that she slipped me a mischievous, juvenile and totally offbeat glance. At the time, I thought I had dreamed given her instantaneous return to an icy and pious attitude.

Hushai had to give me a little tap on the shoulder to make me come back to reality. He beckoned me to follow him.

We slowly crossed the common room. A thick studded door opened to a much smaller room. The young woman with the green star was already sitting there, behind a large, solid and simple wooden table. She urged me to sit facing her. I did so silently. My guards were placed at the four corners of the room. Hushai remained standing right behind me. He said in a voice full of respect:

“My Lady and Mistress, this is Sébastien Debourg. Sébastien, let me introduce you to Lady Clithène, our abbess.”

I couldn't believe that kid could run this community. Without giving me time to realize it, the young woman got up, walked around the table and approached me. In one hand she held two terracotta bowls and in the other hand a sort of ceramic bottle, from which a light smoke was coming out. With her head down, with great concentration, she put one of the bowls in front of me and poured some of the contents of the bottle into it. It looked like a kind of dark green tea. But the smell didn't match anything I knew. She walked around the table and sat down in front of me. She helped herself slowly. Then, in her clear, authoritative voice, she invited me to drink:

“Dear Mr. Debourg, please. This is fumstea that we dry ourselves.”

The unknown drink worried me a little, but the fear of displeasing the Abbess was much greater. I tasted it, it was spicy, bitter, but probably harmless. In turn, the abbess dipped her lips in it. Then she began the conversation, in a firm, accusatory tone, which abruptly closed the welcome ceremony.

“Sir, we took in Ms. Ehrig last night, along with two young gentlemen invited to her home. All three have made serious charges against a traveler they allegedly hosted yesterday. Are you this traveler?”

The old lady had preceded me. I didn't know what she might have said. But her arrival in the middle of the night, exhausted, with the two teenagers, must have pleaded in her favor. And, with her vicious nature, I didn't dare imagine under what torrent of slander she must have tried to hide her infamy. I was going to have to defend myself:

“I met a woman and two kids yesterday, right down the valley. And, about that...”

“I thank you for your frankness,” interrupted the abbess. “Believe me, we are not here to judge you. We simply need to know your point of view before making decisions that could affect our community.”

“I fully understand your concerns. I am ready to explain everything to you in detail.”

Before I could go any further, from behind me, Hushai intervened:

“My Lady and Mistress, first of all, I would like to say that Sébastien followed us without any resistance. Also, the plane crash he survived has been verified. The shock probably explains...”

I barely had time to realize that my hunter seemed to have turned into a defender that, with a wave of the hand, the abbess interrupted him:

“One word before we go any further. Mr. Debourg, you should know that the assistance requested by Ms. Ehrig had arrived on the site. A helicopter was immediately dispatched and the scene of the accident was easily located. But there was no one left on the site. According to our experts, the passengers on the plane were repatriated yesterday around noon. No doubt the black box in your aircraft was able to guide the rescue team quickly.”

I realized that less than a few hours after I had left, everyone had been rescued. I tried to appear to be happy about this, but the news froze me: thinking that at that very moment, back in civilization, I could have been pampered by a compassionate nurse...

“This is further proof of Sébastien’s temporary mental imbalance. A sensible person would never have abandoned the place where help was supposed to arrive. What’s more, the position in which he lay down under the hedge left him perfectly visible. If Martine was able to detect him so easily, it was because he had no intention of hiding. And, once again, he let us approach without trying to run away, confidently, almost amicably...”

“That’s enough, my good Hushai,” intervened the abbess; “the defense of your game honors you. However, it is appropriate to let Mr. Debourg explain himself a little. Mr. Debourg, we are listening.”

After I cleared my throat, I was about to plead my case. I was holding on to the eloquence award I had won when I was a student. I hadn’t become a law school professor for no reason. I weighed my words for a few moments and I went for it.

“Lady and Mistress, — I just remembered that this was how Hushai addressed my pretty judge and, even if giving such a roaring title to this kid was a bit ridiculous, it was better to try to coax her — first of all, I want to thank you and yours for the help sent and for this happy news. The fate of my companions in misfortune had been a constant concern to me since this terrible accident.”

Waving with her hand, the abbess urged me to move on and to come to the facts.

“I was exhausted from a long day’s walk,” I went on, “when I got to that old lady’s house.”

“You refer to Ms. Ehrig, I presume?”

“Yes, well, she didn’t tell me her name. She was with two teenagers. And you have no idea what that lady was doing. It’s barely even possible to tell. I’m afraid, miss, uh... Lady abbess... that for young ears like yours...”

“I am ready to hear all about it. My position demands it. Did she refuse you hospitality while you were in need?”

“No, it isn’t that, she let me into her hovel, gave me food and water. It’s much worse...”

“I can’t imagine...”

“Well, so there you go. She was sexually abusing the two teenagers living in her house.”

“What do you mean? Be specific.”

I was a little hesitant. I turned to Hushai, still standing right behind me. The red-haired man, at least, seemed to have enough life experience. I questioned him with my eyes. His sign was unambiguous. I had to say everything, so I went on:

“Fellatio and sodomy...”

Since no one seemed to understand what I was saying, I added:

“The old woman started sucking on the sex of one of the kids while the other was getting ready to sodomize her.”

“Yes, of course,” the abbess agreed, “Ms. Ehrig is known for her practices, which attract many teenagers. But you mentioned assault. We’re listening to you. Don’t be afraid to shock us.”

I opened my eyes, it was my turn to be confused. I didn’t know what to say. My interlocutor appeared to be thinking too. She suggested:

“Maybe you don’t approve of the sexual practices of Ms. Ehrig?”

“But of course I don’t!”

“And you are so very right, dear sir!” She exclaimed; “Please know that our community completely shares your opinion. This is truly despicable. Such acts are disgusting. We even practice total abstinence. But I interrupt you. Did they offer you the opportunity to participate in their sexual activities?”

“Yes, in fact they did.”

“Well, all right. A warm welcome... And, of course, you declined?”

“But of course.”

“Congratulations! And they didn’t take offense, I imagine?”

“Not at all, they just kept going like I wasn’t there.”

“Fine, fine. So, what happened? What was the problem?”

“Well, I immediately stepped in to interrupt...”

“You could’ve gone out and waited for...”

“Well, hang on a minute, you said it yourself, it was despicable. And those poor, tortured children...”

“Ah! I understand better”, said the abbess suddenly looking worried. “Violence was used against these young men and it was not of their own free will that...”

“But it is worse! They were so perverted that they even seemed to want to... They took the initiative to... And one of them ...”

I stammered, unable to talk anymore. My interlocutor closed up, worried.

“Ms. Ehrig claims that you brutally banged your fist on the table.”

“It was the only way to force them to...”

“I see... One last question: can you show me the contents of your bag, Mr. Debourg?”

I was taken aback and took the meager contents of my bag which, apart from my two bottles of water, only contained my wallet, my mobile phone, a piece of black bread and a slice of bacon.

At this sight, the abbess nodded her head:

“Obviously...”

I was distraught and it must have been felt. It was with relief that I heard Hushai speaking again behind my back, in a deep tone:

“My Lady abbess, this time please listen to me.”

“The floor is yours, my good Hushai, but you understand the situation just as well as I do.”

“Lady abbess. As for the theft, I want to say that Sébastien was in need and that it was only very low value goods. And, even in the district court, forgiveness would obviously be granted. Besides, he comes from a faraway country where, perhaps, all property is common. I’m convinced that all charges related to theft should be dropped.”

“Surely, if that’s all it was... But the intrusive intolerance... and the trauma suffered by these young adults denied in their sexual choices, openly devalued, infantilized perhaps... All this could weigh heavily.”

“Please, Lady abbess, allow me to confess, here and now,” Hushai said, suddenly grandiloquent. “In thought, I have committed the sin of Sébastien many times. Yes, I admit it! Yes, I proclaim it! I often thought of going to the sinner Ehrig to forbid her of her odious practices. I dreamed of stopping the drifts of her evil spirit, even by force... Oh yes! I have sinned by thought!”

“What?” exclaimed the abbess, “Have you sinned? You are soiled? You’re a filthy, stinky tyrant!”

“Oh, yes, my Lady!”

He started screaming. I turned around. Hushai had just opened the top of his dress and started scratching his chest, his nails opening long red gashes. My God, I’d fallen into a cult of psychopaths!

The voice of the abbess resounded, with an icy firmness:

“Calm down immediately!” she ordered Hushai. “The time has not come to atone. At the Great Confession, I will punish you. Stop talking about yourself! Speak for Debourg!”

After catching his breath and calming down, Hushai went on:

“I meant that Sébastien did in fact do what many of us fantasize about doing in thought. He’s a savage. But his impulses are the same as ours. He’s safe for us. We have much to share. We must educate him, civilize him, protect him.”

“Perhaps...”

“There’s purity in him. He confessed his sins without hesitation. And confirmed with great honesty what Ms. Ehrig said. Moreover, he’s an exotic newcomer to the district justice system...”

The abbess imposed silence with a gesture, closed her eyes and breathed deeply. A few long seconds passed, then she resumed:

“You spoke well. If he desires, we’ll hide him. We’ll teach him. And if he deserves it, we’ll take him in.”

“Thank you! Thank you for your leniency, abbess!” Hushai exclaimed, falling to his knees.

The abbess was now looking at me with kindness. I forgot the inconsistencies of her speech and the excesses of Hushai. These people were really strange, but they seemed to wish me well. Maybe they could help me get back to civilization?

With a sign from the abbess, Hushai got up and took me by the shoulder to let me know that the interview was over. He bowed very low and I imitated him.

The abbess pronounced in a monotone, detached voice: “May the peace of the Lamb be with you.”

We moved backwards, while she lowered her head and hit her forehead three times on the table. She got up and looked at me. I then noticed that her pretty forehead was marked by a callus trace that the shock on the table had reddened. Probably the sign of her pious habit of hitting her head on tables. I left while she was still staring at me deeply disturbed.

Lunch was taken in the large common room. The tables had been covered with large purple tablecloths and laid end to end to form two long rows along the length of the room. Hushai guided me to a place that had been reserved for me. It was quite far from the front door, so I had to walk through most of the room in full view of everyone. I perceived in some of them mistrust, reprobation, even fear. But others sent me quick signs of connivance and support. I imagined that my case must have caused some debate among the brothers and sisters. My place was quite far away from the people I had so far been able to meet. In front of me, an old lady with a kindly eye was standing perfectly straight. I responded with a shy smile to her bow of the head. Her strict hair bun was firmly pulled back. To her right, a fat woman with a triple chin was staring at me head-on, with an assumed, childish curiosity. She held out her hand to me to squeeze over the table. Her grip was moist, but firm.

“Ernestine Juboin,” she introduced herself.

“Sébastien Debourg, nice to meet you,” I said politely.

“So, is it true what they say about you?” — she was swallowing — “they say you have raw, violent urges...”

I recoiled. The old lady with the hair bun intervened immediately:

“Excuse her, dear sir. You don’t have to respond to this kind of assault.” — She gave big Ernestine a stern look. — “Besides, I’m sure the rumors going around here are very, very exaggerated. My name is Margot Dulack. Welcome among us, in the peace of Christ the Redeemer.”

At this last word, pressed down, she sent a firm glance at Ernestine, then turned back to me. She made a small gesture to rectify her bun, which was still impeccable. I thanked her with a nod of the head.

Associations, communities and memberships

Ernestine continued in a casual, conversational tone:

“Dear sir, we’re all very interested in your faraway homeland. You’re from ‘France’, I heard?”

“Yes absolutely, absolutely.”

“One says it’s not very far from Europe, correct?”

“Well, specifically, it’s in Europe. Europe contains France and other countries, such as Germany, Italy...”

“Oh really? Very interesting, very interesting!” said Ernestine.

“Personally, I’ve never been out of Arcania,” apologized Margot; “and I’m afraid that’s also the case for Ernestine. Perhaps you would agree to tell us a little about your country?”

“Of course, it will be my pleasure, dear lady. What do you want to know?”

“I don’t know... For example, what are the most important associations over there?”

“Well... we have a lot of associations... maybe the Red Cross.”

“And you, what associations do you belong to?” asked fat Ernestine greedily. “According to what they say about your behavior, you must belong to an uncompromising, rigid, very impulsive association...”

“No... I don’t belong to any particular association.”

“None?” exclaimed Ernestine.

“So interesting,” said Margot. “You’re a humanist purist, perhaps?”

“Well, I don’t know what you mean by that,” I said carefully.

“We have in misarchy people who refuse to belong to any association and who try to belong only to the whole of humanity,” — she gratified me with a deep, admiring look- “these humanist purists strive to be nothing more than human beings, without their own specificities. They claim to be bearers of all cultures, all thoughts, all affiliations. For a great solitary traveler like you, obviously, this makes sense.”

I feared she was thinking I was some kind of mystic. It seemed prudent to me to make things clear.

“To be honest, I’m not quite that. If I had to define myself, I would say that first and foremost, I am French.”

“Really?” Margot asked, surprised, “France is not only a place? It is also an association?”

“Well... No, not really. It’s a nation.”

“I don’t know this concept at all,” Margot admitted with curiosity. “‘Nation’, you say?”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe if you tell us some of the characters of this ‘French nation’, we could understand?”

“For sure! France is above all a great culture. We invented the croissant and the baguette. Our wines are probably the finest in the world. Our cheeses are known for their diversity and their quality: camembert, brie, saint-marcellin, roquefort...”

“You belong to a gastronomic association?” asked Ernestine, very interested.

“France is not an association, as I told you. It’s a nation.”

“Oops! My apologies, I forgot. You belong to a gourmet ‘nation’ then?”

“Yes. You could say that. We also share common values, like the republic. Our motto is ‘Freedom, equality, fraternity.’”

“Your ‘nation’ of values is the same as your gastronomic ‘nation’?” asked Margot.

“Of course! France is both one, and the other and much more.”

“And you belong to other ‘nations’?”

“No, no. I’m not binational. I’m just French, that’s all.”

“And France has a domain, a space for itself?”

“Exactly. France is a territory and a people.”

“I think I understood,” suggested Margot at Ernestine; “he belongs to an extec, like us. The ‘nations’ are extecs.”

“An Extec?” I asked. “I’ve heard that word before, but..”

“We call Extec ‘EXclusive and TErritorial Communities’,” explained Margot. “They are exclusive associations in the sense that you can only belong to them. And they have their own territory and their own code, in other words their own laws.”

“It seems to be equivalent,” I approved.

“Us too, we belong to an extec!” exclaimed Ernestine. “And our code is one of the most demanding of all Arcania!”

“We all have accepted it,” added Margot, gracing me with the sweet pacified smile of the illuminated ones. “We commune together in Christ. Our faith is our joy and our guide.”

“It is true that the strength of our love is not common” Ernestine added.

“Our code is so intense,” went on Margot, “that it has already caused us some problems with the fundamentals. We’re on the cutting edge. It must be a pleasure for an extec enthusiast like you. You’re lucky you ran into us.”

She added, in the tone of complicity, as if we had just committed together a little crime:

“There aren’t too many of us who are fond of extecs, are there? Tell us more about your extec,” Margot suggested. “What’s its religion?”

These two nuns obviously didn’t understand anything.

“France is a nation of Catholic tradition,” I explained patiently.

“And of course, other religions are forbidden there.”

“No, not at all. It’s true that some religions have a harder time fitting in. Muslims, for example. That’s the whole problem with communitarianism. In fact, we have had to prohibit the wearing of certain excessive Muslim clothing, such as the full veil. And in our schools, the Muslim veil is prohibited.”

“If your nation is catholic, it seems the least it can do,” approved Margot. “A Muslim can’t be a member of a Catholic association. When the Garcos family lost our faith, they terminated their membership in our community and left.”

“Of course,” Ernestine resumed. “You can’t both adhere to an association’s code and refuse it. If your code prohibits the Muslim religion..”

“But, as I told you, this is not the case!” I protested. “Our laws recognize freedom of religion. In fact, this freedom is a core value of our nation.”

“Non-Catholics can join France? If you are an exclusive community, it should be forbidden to adhere to any religion other than that of the nation. Normally, an extec prohibits adherence to other codes..”

I started shaking my head with weariness. Margot resumed, very focused:

“If I get it, you can join the nation of France and still adhere to Catholicism or the Muslim religion?”

“Exactly,” I approved with some relief.

“So, the ‘nations’ are not exclusive of other memberships, they are not extecs.”

“I don’t understand anymore,” mumbled fat Ernestine. “I thought you prohibited certain religious symbols.”

“It is just about defending some dress neutrality, at least in school,” I said.

“But faith in God is not to be hidden!” interrupted Ernestine, shocked. “It must be exposed! It must be voiced aloud!”

Having, with these words, joined action to words, the whole room turned towards her. I saw amused smiles and a few approving nods.

Fortunately, the arrival of the dishes distracted the attention. The meal consisted of a potted chicken with a large bowl of vegetable stock and lots of black bread. It all looked quite yummy. The old lady with the bun gave the sign by starting to peck delicately at a slice of bread. Fat Ernestine served herself abundantly and dipped her bread in the broth, before swallowing it greedily with disconcerting speed. I too was starting to eat in order to regain strength. Ernestine seemed torn between hunger and curiosity. She finally decided not to sacrifice anything and it is with her mouth still full that she asked me:

“And, do you guys often change nations?”

“No,” I said annoyed; “of course not!”

“No?”

She seemed to be slightly shocked. Margot made her little gesture of putting her bun back in place. She exhaled sharply.

“Sister Ernestine,” she said; “I think we’ve already asked a lot of our host. If we keep asking him questions, he’s going to end up counting us some sacrifs. It should rather be us trying to explain the ways of our system to him.”

Ernestine nodded her head, a little reluctantly, before swallowing a large swig of broth to console herself.

“In Arcania,” explained Margot, “on average, an inhabitant changes his or her main association about ten times. And you have to count the secondary or accessory associations, the multiple memberships... It’s true that associations are rarely exclusive. And even rarer are the real extec, with their own code. Which means that code changes are unfortunately infrequent in Arcania... Except for extec enthusiasts like us.” She ended with a smile for me.

Ernestine grabbed the tablecloth and, under the disapproving gaze of her neighbor, wiped her hands. Then, in a clearer voice, she swaggered:

“Me, I’ve already changed code six times and I’ve never been anywhere but in extec!

“The average of about ten changes per person is just an average,” said Margot. “Brother Masoch, our elder, must have changed associations only once or twice. He’s a hyperpersistent. Our abbess is very young, but this is already her sixth change of main association with at least two changes of code. You see, she and I came together in a common enlightenment” — she had a touch of pride in her eyes — “we used to be at the Youppys, another extec and...”

She was interrupted by the giggle of Ernestine:

“Ha! Ha ! At the Youppys,” she chuckled and winked at me.

“Don’t listen to her,” continued Margot slightly upset, stroking her bun with a quick gesture. “Youppys are an honorable association, even if...”

Ernestine held back another giggle.

"I know how you feel about Youppys," retorted Margot looking upset. "But, having lived among them for six years, I can tell you that between our faith and theirs, there is more in common than you might think. Moreover, once again you are attacking past community memberships. I have confessed and atoned. While you are sinning by speaking out and criticizing my past."

To this sentence, Ernestine seemed to cower. Margot, after regaining her soothed smile in a few seconds, turned back to me:

"I guess you haven't heard of the Youppys. It's an association that intends to live in tepees, like the ancient Indians. It rejects all forms of possession. Everything belongs to everyone. So, it's quite frowned upon to have the same sexual partner more than two or three times in a row. No one really knows whose kids are whose and... Well, I'm sorry. We're at lunch and I'm talking about things that may be legitimately embarrassing to you. In fact, it was because we no longer shared a taste for these practices that Clisthène and I left, to join our most holy Brotherhood of the Lamb."

"And for you," Ernestine asked, "are changes of nationality frequent?"

"They are possible, but they're very rare."

As Ernestine seemed to be taken aback again, Margot intervened, as a peacekeeper:

"No doubt they change less because they choose better!" she told her. "By the way, dear sir, if it is not indiscreet, during your childhood, how many 'nations' did you try before choosing your first?"

"But, come on," I said, desperate; "you don't change nations like that! You're born with one and you keep it!"

"Sorry, but now I don't get it" Margot let go in disbelief. "What does birth have to do with it? A little baby can't choose..."

"How old are you when choosing your first nation?" Asked Ernestine.

"I think you didn't understand anything!" I exclaimed, annoyed. "A nation is not a small association, a vague community, a small group, or a sect like yours. France is a nation of more than sixty million people. People are born there and normally stay there all their lives."

Ernestine looked at me in disbelief:

"Are you joking? Sixty million? As many as in the whole of Arcania? And on a few hundred hectares? But that wouldn't ever hold! You've got to be kidding us!"

"Madam," I replied, "France has a territory of six hundred and seventy-five thousand square kilometers."

"But it's absurd, absurd," mumbled Margot... "You realize, to change communities, you would have to travel hundreds of kilometers; it would be almost impossible... It would be such an up-rooting..."

She reflected intensely, to the point of mechanically detaching a small lock of hair from her bun. She was mumbling, as if to herself:

"In Arcania, it is strictly forbidden to found an extec with more than two hundred inhabitants or more than two hundred hectares. In order to limit dependencies and guarantee freedom of variation, there are also all these rules that..."

She stopped for a moment, then said slowly: "Your 'nation'... If I understand correctly, nobody really chooses to belong to it, isn't it? All your rules, your code... are imposed rules?"

"Of course, our rules are binding," I said. "How would you do otherwise?"

I shrugged my shoulders while Margot seemed to be looking for a very old memory. Finally, she suggested:

“I believe that the ‘nations’ you’re talking about are not extecs, districts, or even associations. They’re what our anthropologists call a ‘State’.”

“Exactly” I approved. “That’s what I’ve been trying to explain to you. France is a state, a nation state.”

Ernestine looked at me like I just said a bad word. Margot seemed genuinely sorry. Decidedly, these people are too used to living in their sects to accept the most simple things. I adopted a resolutely sullen attitude. Everyone was now concentrating on their soup.

Margot suddenly came out of her silence. She seemed horrified. She whispered to Ernestine in Spanish:

“That means that their rules that forbid Muslim signs are prohibitions of deviant expressions!”

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Ernestine.

She pulled herself together and whispered back in Spanish: “That explains his reaction to Ms. Ehrig. Do you realize! In France, they might put us in prison!”

Ernestine seemed seriously frightened. I understand Spanish very well and I had heard perfectly what they said. I was about to respond harshly to defend my country and western civilization, when I was interrupted by a powerful ringing of a bell.

The ringing hadn’t even stopped when, already, all turned silent and got up. Margot whispered quickly to me: “It’s time for the weekly atonement”, beckoning me to remain silent. At the second bell, everyone kneeled in silence, next to their benches. I decided to imitate them, haphazardly.

At the third bell, the abbess rose, ecstatic, luminous, in her large white dress embroidered with the green star. In the silence, her beautiful voice resounded in a half-grandiloquent, half-poignant tone:

“I have sinned! YES! I have sinned!”

Everyone was looking at her. The abbess had her eyes turned to the sky, she seemed as if inhabited by an inner force. What happened next concerned me. She terrorized me.

“I have sinned. In my filthy brain. Yes, I have sinned in thought. During the evaluation of the newcomer, I sinned with lust. He’s come a long way. He carries good, fertile and new genes. I confess. Yes! He turned me on. My animal flesh shivered. I thought about his body, his hairs, and I felt my saliva flooding into my mouth. My filthy parts got wet. I ask to be punished without mercy for what I am: a dirty lusty bitch!”

She screamed these last words, fell to her knees and started to hit her forehead on the floor. She sobbed.

At the other side of the room, a tall, one-eyed monk with long white hair stood up. He waited a few seconds for the tension to build up and shouted:

“Yes! You have sinned. Yes, you got dirty. By blood you will be chastised! May the blood of the Lamb redeem your sin.”

The abbess got up, grabbed a knife left on the table and cut the palm of her hand deeply. She spilled her blood on her forehead, her mouth, her clothes. She lifted up her dress and brushed her genitals which became red, sticky, dripping. Again, she covered her face with blood. Her tears flowed freely and left large, clear streaks on her cheeks covered with hemoglobin. Finally, she

fell to the ground, as if unconscious. Through it all, the old man continued to rehearse over and over again with scorn:

“Wash up! Wash up again! Lustful bitch! Cleanse yourself!”

The confession of this young woman had shocked me, her masochistic torture had horrified me. I was panicking. What about me? What would they do to me? But I didn't have much time to torment myself. The abbess was getting up, upright. She removed her stained dress, revealing without any shame her body whose reddish streaks hid neither grace nor slenderness. A young nun brought a basin of water and a piece of cloth. She washed her face and body. The abbess shivered under the stroke of the cold water, then she let herself dry, her eyes half closed. A young monk kneeled down and carefully bandaged her wounded hand, not without first having carefully disinfected it. A clean dress was brought to her and she slowly put it on. The assembly, captivated, contemplated in silence. The abbess again seemed perfectly serene and smiling. Her gaze crossed mine and I perceived a kind of complicity, as if we had just made love.

The old man with the stitched face then confessed. He would have thought, several times during the day, of the marmalade that he had tasted every morning before joining the brotherhood. The abbess called him a voracious pig and ordered him to slap his cheeks. The old man obeyed without sparing any effort. While he continued to slap his face, Ernestine, at my table, claimed that, taken with hunger outside the consecrated hours, she had stolen and eaten a loaf of bread and fruit from the orchard. She was called a meat sack and a full wineskin, then condemned to beat her cheeks and belly. Others followed. The members of the brotherhood took turns making confessions and the Abbess ordered a corporal punishment for each one in connection with their faults. One was condemned to drive a nail into his heel. Another hung up weighted clamps to his nipples. Two others were condemned to whip each other. To dominate the tumult of moans and complaints, the abbess was now shouting punishments and insults. For some, the punishments were quite symbolic while others were cruel or humiliating. Everyone complied without delay. Only the children seemed to be spared. But their worried little eyes watched the apocalyptic scene: the whole room was filled with shouting, hitting, crying and screaming of contrition. Terrorized by this sudden hell, I was standing still and looking at the ground. I didn't even dare to breathe. I was hoping that no one would think of me!

Silence gradually returned. Everyone was busy healing and erasing their wounds. A few icy glances pierced me. I remembered the words of Ernestine: “In France, they would surely put us in prison!” For once, this crazy lady was right! These lunatics deserved prison or, at least, psychiatric internment. Hushai approached me. He was holding what I thought was a tuft of hair in his hand until I saw a hole in his beard, where a small piece of reddish skin appeared, half depilated. He smiled at me and said in a reassuring voice:

“I see your regret, my friend newcomer. But you cannot participate in the remission of sins until you are a full member of our brotherhood. Contain your sadness. My heart is not mistaken. Soon you will be one of us.”

He gave me a huge smile and rubbed the little hairless square on his chin.

He was about to leave, probably to throw away his handful of torn beard, when a monk came and whispered something in his ear. His face immediately turned worried. He moved closer to me and quickly said:

“Follow me. The district guards have just arrived. They must not see you.”

From behind my shoulder, I just had time to see a woman and a man in very dark blue, almost black uniforms appear. The cut was classic, modern, strict. I saw two golden acorns embroidered

on their collars. Many adepts had come towards them to form a barrier. For a moment, I had the impulse to call these policemanly individuals to my rescue. But Hushai took my arm and was holding it tightly. He seemed to genuinely fear for me. His look convinced me as much as his grip. I sneaked away in his pursuit.

I had been holed up in some kind of big closet for hours. There was some food in there — mostly dried meat. That reassured me. If they had wanted to imprison me, putting me in a meat locker would have made no sense. However, the door had been locked from the outside and I was indeed trapped in this tiny cubicle. I barely had enough room to sit with my legs bent. This position was very uncomfortable. But, at least I could evaluate the situation. I realized what was happening to me: I was at the mercy of a bloodthirsty cult. Their brutality had made me lose my common sense. It struck me, but a little late, that I should have called the police for help. I had my chance and I blew it.

I heard a noise, then I saw a ray of light under the door of my closet cell and someone opened the door. The man who came to get me was about sixty years old. Tall and thin, he was limping. His face and hands were covered with scars, and it was easy to imagine that, under his dress, only a patchwork of sewn skins remained. He told me something, but I couldn't understand him because he was lisping. I could have pushed him around, he was no match for it. I was given a second chance to run away but was unsure. His ugliness was scaring me a little. In the end, I chose to follow him, without causing any difficulty.

As we went up two floors, he made me understand that my case was being discussed and that I had to wait. He took me to a small room and, before I could ask him any questions, abandoned me, closing the door behind him. The door had a small lock, but it could only be locked from the inside. Nothing blocked me anymore. I waited a few moments to make sure my guard was gone. I slowly opened the bedroom door and looked outside. No one was watching me. This room had a small table, a bed, a window and, to my surprise, a small adjoining bathroom with a toilet. It had white tiles, very simple, but perfectly modern and functional. This was an unexpected luxury. All of a sudden, I felt dirty, filthy as a pig. I wondered how the little abbess had managed not to be totally disgusted. On the bed laid a large, clean cloth gown. I decided to wash myself before running away to God knows what perils.

The shower was hot. I let myself be massaged by the jet and intoxicated by the steam escaping from it. I rubbed myself with the block of black soap found on the sink and rinsed myself for a long time. Then, I remained totally amorphous under this burning water that never stopped flowing. I would have stayed there for hours, if it wasn't for the fatigue and the desire to test this bed that was awaiting me. The sheets were a bit rough, but the mattress was surprisingly comfortable. All these emotions had exhausted me and I fell asleep instantly.

There was a knock on the door. I needed a moment to realize where I was and what I was doing there. I grunted: "Yes... one second...", and I got up. I felt ashamed of myself for having taken the easy way out. I quickly put on the dress that had been left there. A glance outside proved to me that the sun was setting. Not only did I sleep, but I slept for a long time. Someone knocked again with insistence. I opened.

That was my caretaker, the old man with the scars. His ugliness hit me even more than the first time. I decided to secretly call him Patchwork-man, which gave me the courage to follow him. He led me to a room where three people were waiting for me, sitting on the same side of a long table. In the middle, Clisthène, the beautiful abbess, smiled at me. I had seen her contorting herself in her blood, screaming out all sorts of barbaric torments, but I felt curiously happy that she was there. To her right was a man in his fifties in a dark blue uniform, with a collar decorated with acorns, which I immediately recognized as that of the district police. The presence of a constituted authority reassured me. To the left of the abbess, I recognized Hushāi, whose beautiful reddish and grayish beard had now been amputated from the hairs pulled out the day before in confession. Patchwork-man joined them and sat next to Hushāi. There were now four of them facing me. The abbess beckoned me to sit on the chair set back a few meters from the table.

The right to choose one's right and one's limits: basic, supplementary and special codes

In a solemn tone, the abbess opened the discussion:

"Dear Mr. Debourg, your case has been the subject of some very interesting debates among us. We wanted to share it with you. You have already had the honor of meeting our elder, Father Masoch — she pointed to Patchwork-man — and our good monk Hushai. Let me introduce you to the temporary district police sub-serviceman Marc Réknis," she pointed to the man in uniform.

"Mr. Debourg," began Patchwork-man, lisping, "the presence here of the district authority makes it clear to you that our wish to preserve your presence in our abbey a secret has failed. We have done our best. But, in my opinion, the simplest thing would be for you to voluntarily surrender yourself to the authority, represented here by Mr. Réknis."

"Thanks Mr. Masoch." The man in uniform, the so-called Réknis, seized the opportunity to speak. His voice was tense, as if to mask a deep-seated irritation. "Mr. Debourg, Mr. Masoch's proposal seems to me wise and measured. And may I point out to you that you don't really have a choice."

"But he does have a choice!" interrupted Hushai sharply. "Don't listen to him, Sébastien. You may choose freely!"

"Mr. Debourg," continued coldly Réknis with an additional tone of irritation, "you probably do not have your full conscience and, as a newcomer, you certainly know nothing about our laws. But you should at least know this: we have a small body of mandatory rules, which we call 'the fundamentals' and which are binding for everyone. It's just a hundred general principles. For the rest, each citizen is, for the most part, able to make a contractual choice of his or her normative network. But it is still necessary to adhere to them..."

"But that's the point!" intervened Hushai. "Sébastien is a brother in training..."

"Anyone who has not adhered to a particular code must apply the Supplemental Code," continued Réknis, imperturbable.

"Stop it!" interrupted Clithène, "you can see he's not getting it. Isn't that right, Mr. Debourg?"

"Huh... yes... but, uh, it's hard..."

"The fundamentals," said Réknis, "that is to say the few rules of the imperative core, are not enough. Everyone has to choose a code. Finally, more precisely, if you don't choose a code, you are governed by the Supplemental Code. It's called that because it applies when no other code has been chosen... It supplements... You understand?"

"Yes... somewhat..."

"You didn't choose a particular code, so you are governed by our Supplemental Code," Réknis said, articulating, as if he was speaking to a light-headed idiot.

“But it’s ridiculous!” Masoch intervened. “You’re not going to give him a whole lecture on common normativity!”

“How do you want him to understand if we don’t tell him anything?” said Réknis with authority. “Mr. Debourg, each particular code has its own standards ledger that must be signed by the adherent. The Supplemental Code then ceases to apply to him. His particular code, his normative contract if you prefer, becomes the only...”

“That’s it! It’s like I said!” triumphed Hushai. “Sébastien, you should know that our brotherhood is an extec, a community with an exclusive territory. It has its own code! If you wish to become a member of our community, it is according to this code only that you will be judged for the sins you committed in brutally assaulting Ms. Ehrig. And you will escape the judgment and punishment laid down by the Supplemental Code,” he gave me a smile and a wink.

“Effectively,” squeaked Réknis, trying to stay calm, “if you had adhered to the brotherhood code, – which you hadn’t. And so, in my capacity as defender of the Supplemental Code, you must follow me to be judged.”

“Not at all! He is entitled to a pre-adhesion probationary training period!” Exclaimed Hushai.

“It’s totally wrong!” Réknis retorted. “No inter-community jury could accept such babble. Pre-adhesive training periods are no excuse to hide and evade punishment for outside offenders. Mr. Debourg, believe me, for the good of everyone here, I am asking you to follow me to answer for your offenses before the district court.”

“Stop it Marc!” let go the abbess by suddenly adopting a strangely familiar tone. “Your beautiful uniform doesn’t make you psychorigid.”

“Madam abbess, I won’t allow you!” Réknis retorted. “Your association of loonies...”

“Need I remind you that you spent two years in our association!”

“And so what? I am now a temporary district police sub-serviceman and I am for seven more months! And we need it! Clithène, since when do you question normativity choices? The deviances in your community are becoming excessive and...”

“No, no, calm down Marc, that’s not what I meant... but a flexible interpretation.”

“Flexible, my ass!” Réknis seemed really to lose his temper this time. “What are you going to make him do if he joins your sadistic association?”

Hushai got up suddenly by overturning his chair. He opened his arms in a cross and launched with an almost begging tone:

“Brother, don’t listen to him! Adhere and join us! That cop won’t be able to touch you anymore!”

Réknis in turn rose angrily.

“*Pax civis!*” the abbess shouted.

Silence was restored and everyone sat down. She took advantage of this to continue:

“You know Sébastien,” she said using my first name, “for beginners, I can order almost sweet punishments, don’t worry.” She gave me a cheerful little pout. “It’s only with time that people want more, always more... and, by the way, you can leave as soon as you’ve had enough. I’ve only been here a year and a half. Réknis stayed for two years in total...”

“Enough!” Patchwork-Man had just struck the table with his two fists with a force that one couldn’t suspect. “Versatiles! Filthy versatiles! Membership in our fraternity is a sacred trust. It is not a whim. This Debourg can’t join just to settle with the police. Let him go! Hang him elsewhere! And you, abbess, you who should be the first bearer of faith... Filthy versatile!”

“Father Masoch, father Masoch,” answered the pretty Clithène with her sublime and deep voice, “all here venerate your thirty years of community. A great founding member, your unwavering faith and love for...”

“That’s enough!” interrupted Réknis, “look at what that old fool has gotten himself into with his fraternity. He founded the worst...”

“I forbid you...” squeaked Hushāi with clenched fists.

I could not stand this anymore:

“But, come on! What’s the matter with everybody? What do you want from me? I did nothing, nothing but try to defend two poor children. I just want to go home. Just let me go!”

My words had a certain effect. My judges looked at each other, worried.

“Your presumption of innocence is not in question, dear sir,” said Réknis, suddenly calm. “It has been reported to me that you recognize a moral degradation with threat. But, if you deny these charges, everything is different. Ah! I should have been wary of what I was told here.” He gave an angry look at Clithène, who answered immediately:

“But no, no... Debourg, say it yourself. You spontaneously admitted it before us, with great frankness, with an open heart...”

After a few heavy seconds of silence, as I remained amazed, she added:

“You... You did admit to interrupting the activity of two young adults and an old woman with hostile shouts?”

“And so what?” I was getting bold, “it was about protecting children from depravity.”

“So,” asked Réknis in a sententious tone, “do you recognize the facts?”

“But I am proud of them! I saved those two kids...”

“Saved?” asked Réknis. “You are accused of screaming and forbidding the pursuit of a desired pleasure...”

This time it was too much. I replied to him sharply:

“These are unnatural, unworthy acts. This is not ‘pleasure’. And the pseudo-will...”

“So, you admit the facts,” cut Réknis; “and you feel no remorse. Poor Ms. Ehrig... And young Mirepoil and Arsène... You must realize the trauma you have caused these two young people, still sexually beginners... If, every time they take pleasure, they think of your disgusted look, of your violence... Our post-traumatic psychologists are helping them to overcome and...”

“I only did my duty. And, since everyone seems to be able to choose their law as they see fit in your country, let me tell you that I choose French law. And, in France, it is if I had done nothing to protect these children that I could have been attacked for failure to assist a person in danger.”

“In danger? In danger of taking a desired pleasure?” Clithène seemed worried this time, “you’re not going to pretend that in your association...”

“In my country, almost anything is allowed between consenting adults. But still! Between an old lady and two poor, perverted children! This is despicable.”

“I understand,” interrupted Réknis. “You wanted to impose your standard of pleasure on others. This is more serious than I thought. It’s as if members of one association assaulted members of another to impose their rules. If there is only one fundamental rule left, it would be nice to ban such aggressions! You have dared to invoke here the laws of your community to base an assault on the customs of another association... This is serious. You must realize that. It is serious.”

“But I am French! I am not subject to your nonsensical rules! Let me go!”

“And in France, dear sir, can a newcomer come and steal, forbid the pursuit of pleasures, why not loot, kill, as long as his own rights allow him to do so? No normative system would accept

such a thing! As I have already told you, we have our basic, minimal, fundamental rules. Respect for individual choices is the first of these fundamental rules. And we will know how to defend it!”

Réknis was now looking at me angrily. The looks of Clithène, Masoch and Hushai were frightened. I understood that I had only made my case worse. They appeared to be reconciling against me. I had to stop arguing with common sense. Never contradict the madmen. Fortunately, Hushai, although visibly troubled, once again took my defense:

“We must end this session here. This poor man has just been in a plane crash, and he’s been walking around for a whole day with almost no food. Can’t you see he’s rambling? The rules he’s invoking can’t exist anywhere. And, by the way, we’re not here to prosecute him. Mr. Debourg, you need to rest. Then you will return to your normal state and, if you adhere to our faith and if your repentance is sincere, it is according to our code that you will be judged and punished for your faults.”

“Certainly not!” interrupted Réknis. “Mr. Debourg, you come under the district justice system. This conciliation has lasted too long, -he got up – I must ask you to follow me now!”

The authoritative tone of this Réknis did not suffer any retort. I was getting up. Hushai looked distraught. In this crazy world, he was the only one who showed me kindness. I caught the abbess’s eye. I thought I could read an implicit request to stay. I remained for a moment torn between the authority of this Réknis and the look of the abbess. Everything, rationally, pushed me to leave. But strangely enough, I wanted to stay. What to do? If I decided to stay, I would have to play their game. I turned my eyes in my sockets, shook myself into spasms and took my head in my hands. I took the opportunity to put my fingers in my eyes a little and, crying, I said:

“Sorry. Yeah... now I get it. In my barbaric world, everything is wrong. Yes, I have sinned!” I was trying to imitate the hysteria I observed the day before, and I exclaimed: “I am a violent and tyrannical monster!”

I collapsed in my chair and tried to sob. I felt like my performance was only moderately credible. Réknis seemed very worried. But the other three were rather smiling, without me knowing whether it was approval, irony or the pleasure of embarrassing the district authority. I wiped away my tears as best I could, and in a voice that was half confident, half whining, I implored:

“Oh! Lady and abbess, father Masoch, brother Hushai, my only desire is to atone for my sins. Let me blend into your holy association. Have mercy on my soul. I promise you that I will try through penance to regain my lost purity.”

Hushai had a triumphant look in his eyes. Masoch remained scowling and perplexed; he even shook his head. But Clithène agreed with me. With a gesture, she stopped Masoch who was about to speak and said, with a certain solemnity:

“In my quality as abbess and lady of this brotherhood, I accept you among us, brave Debourg.”

Masoch was muttering something incomprehensible. The abbess didn’t pay attention to it. She looked at Réknis with a little offbeat pout, smiling, mischievous and irresistible. Réknis rose his eyes to the sky and, in a resigned tone, he said:

“Oh boy, a retroactive adherence of questionable sincerity to cover up past mistakes... That’s really more than borderline. But hey, if his misconduct is acknowledged and sanctioned under your association’s rules... I might be able to get that across.”

“Thanks Marc,” conceded the abbess.

She leaned over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

My decision to join this cult was crazy. I didn't know what had come over me. The abbess had promised a light punishment, 'sweet' even... I let myself be lured in. Now I couldn't imagine what she had meant by that. A council of six high-ranking members drawn by lot had yet to approve my membership. But Hushai didn't leave me much hope to escape from my integration: "To decline an admission, that's really quite unheard of."

He took me on a tour of the buildings and grounds of the Brotherhood of the Lamb. I had to admit that these fanatics had managed to organize an economy of rigorous subsistence.

"Our very holy community has about eighty members," explained Hushai, "and we are almost self-sufficient in terms of food. Except for noodles, which we can't grow."

The few fields around seemed to be carefully cultivated, the animals were healthy, order reigned. Visiting the reserves, however, I realized that the concept of 'noodles' had to be interpreted broadly, as it included tea, coffee, cocoa powder, salt, mustard... These people did not live in autarky. In their barn, next to two magnificent draught horses, I spotted a small tractor and a tiller of modern appearance, as well as a small Renault 4, all dented but which seemed to still be in working order. Nonetheless, it was a Renault. It was French. It was from home. I almost had tears in my eyes. If this car had made it here, it meant that there was a way to go the other way, to leave here and return to France.

I was carefully questioning Hushai about the surroundings. He confirmed to me that I was on the borders of a country that its inhabitants called 'Arcania'. Hushai claimed that this country had just over eighty million inhabitants and occupied a territory of almost one million square kilometers, almost twice the size of France. My geographical knowledge is not excellent, but still, I should have heard of such a large country. I asked him if he did not have another name. He told me that outside, Arcania was known as ***. That name sounded vaguely familiar. I asked him for clarification. He told me it's a country located on the edge of the *** ocean, next to *** and ***. This allowed me to roughly locate their Arcania. I was far from home but, in this age of satellites and planes, there was nothing insurmountable about it. All I had to do was go to a city, any city, and find transportation. From there it should not be difficult to get to an airport. I still had my international credit card. With it, I would be fine. All I had to do was stay calm and keep my reason.

I was in the middle of nowhere, on the border of this Arcania. Only a few perverts seemed to be gathered there. Maybe it was a kind of reservation where the mentally ill were isolated, rather than being cared for in proper psychiatric wards. Such misery! Then I thought of the first children I met. They let these psychopaths reproduce and abuse their offspring ad infinitum. I had to seize the first opportunity to run away. Normal people might only have been a day or two away. I sought to quietly ask a few more questions to find out in which direction to run away. But Hushai demanded that I concentrate on the brotherhood:

"My brother, you have to appear before the council tomorrow and this is not the time to disperse."

Hushai was showing me around the stewardship office. A room cluttered with papers, a few large rolls of parchment and three small laptops being recharged.

Electricity. It was like a light bulb going off in my head. Here it was, my solution! If I followed the power lines, I could only make it to civilization. I hadn't seen any power poles. But they couldn't have buried their cables over long distances. I asked my guide about the origin of this

electricity. He told me that the simplest thing was still to follow him, that he would show me. Perfect!

We were coming out of the hamlet. At the top of a small hillock a few hundred meters away, an impressive totem pole painted in bright colors appeared, perhaps fifteen meters high. It was surmounted by a sort of assembly of metal strips, vaguely forming a pear shape. This enormous 'pear', about three meters high, was turning very quickly on itself, carried by the wind. The whole thing was reflected in a small artificial lake at the foot of the assembly. I asked Hushāi carefully about the cult they might devote to this magnificent totem pole and its big twirling hat. He answered with a benevolent smile:

"That's a small hydro-wind power unit, there are some everywhere." As I persisted in my questioning, Hushāi explained to me slowly, articulating well. "That 'hat' is in fact a propeller which the wind turns. It is attached to a very complicated object, which is called a 'turbine'. And the turbine transforms the movement into electricity."

He emphasized the absence of any magical force in God's work. As I nodded cautiously, Hushāi specified that the turbine primarily supplies electricity. When the wind blows enough, it provides even more than is necessary. The surplus is used to produce hydrogen by hydrolysis to power the tractor's fuel cell, and what's left over is used to bring water up into the pond. When the wind stops, the water is simply brought down, to turn other turbines and provide what is needed continuously. Again, he reminded me that their daily needs were moderate since, apart from computers, a few low-energy light bulbs, the freezer...

Walking back to my room, I was still confused. Their miniature power station, the old lady's smartphone, the helicopter the abbess talked about... These mixes of barbarism and modernity, destitution and wealth, made me uncomfortable. The relative material well-being of these people made me abandon the idea of a reserve of the mentally ill. It must be a small phantasmagorical universe, created by some eccentric billionaire in order to satisfy unavowable impulses. The plane must have fallen in the middle of his immense private domain. I had to get out of here to tell the world what was going on. Then the police would be able to put a stop to this delirium and at least protect the children who were immersed in it. I could see why they wanted to keep me here so badly. The little comedy earlier with the braggart with the golden acorns had aimed to make me stay. If I showed any signs of running away, these people were probably ready for anything. Maybe the worst. I was going to have to be very careful and trust no one.

It was already three o'clock in the morning. Impossible to get to sleep. When I had come back to my room I had realized that my clothes were gone. I was afraid that this was a maneuver to keep me from running away. In that ridiculous white dress, I would be spotted immediately.

I looked out the window at the little surrounding countryside that the gentle glow of the night was letting me see. I had spotted a dirt road that seemed to leave the hamlet and go somewhere. But, in my monastic disguise of sorts, I didn't dare to leave. Nor did I dare to imagine what would happen to me if I stayed here. Here I was, turning this dilemma over and over in my head, when I heard someone or something scratching at my door. I didn't move. I must have had misheard. But now there was a knock, loud and clear. I approached the door. I took the risk of opening it, not without preparing to close it again with a sharp jab in case of danger. On the other side, the spectacle that awaited me amazed me. It was Clisthène, the abbess, with her hair down, haggard,

out of breath, dressed in a simple nightgown. She ordered me with a breath to let her in. I was too stunned to refuse. She came in sharply, closed the door behind her, beckoned me to shut up and sat down on my bed. She whispered:

“Shhh... you have to be quiet. I shouldn’t be here. The admissions board met tonight to prepare for your audition tomorrow, and... well, I just had to warn you that...”

She was silent, seemingly catching her breath. I was there, completely baffled, standing still, waiting for her to speak again. She got out of bed, approached me. Closer again. I was paralyzed. There were only a few more centimeters between us. I was about to take a big step back but she didn’t give me any time. She embraced me and held me close. I felt her body, her belly, her breasts sticking to me. My hair stood up on my head. I shivered and breathed in deeply as if I was going to drown, but I didn’t have time to breathe out. She had stuck her mouth against mine and was kissing me deeply. All her warmth overwhelmed me. I felt like my head was about to explode, and I had a violent, involuntary, shameless erection. It didn’t seem to frighten her. She dragged me towards the bed while sliding a hand under my dress, on my thigh. It was too much, I burst with a little cry.

I was distraught. She was looking at me with a little concern. I sat on the bed and she sat beside me. My breathing was noisy, jerky. I felt completely ridiculous. She looked at me with a little annoyance, but caressed my hand. Gradually I recovered my breath and lay down on the bed. I felt exhausted, as if I was full of sleeping pills. She smiled at me. Fortunately, I pulled myself together and I stood up somewhat. She seemed to have compassion for me. I couldn’t resist and indulged in getting some rest.

I was being shaken. I got my nose pinched. What was going on? I woke up on the lookout. It was Clithène. She was scolding me a little bit because, supposedly, I had been snoring like a little piggy. She told me that nicely with a smile. I couldn’t get angry, especially since she added: “A cute little piggy.” She gave me a little kiss on the lips and her face lit up with a huge smile. My eyes moistened. She was so beautiful. My chest, my belly, all my body was tight. She made sure I was wide awake by fluffing my hair and then, calmly, she took stock:

“I’ve had plenty of time to think. There wasn’t much I could do about you...”

She was giving me a reproaching pout. All the same, in a brotherhood that advocates abstinence, the great abbess... And you, you naughty tempter, who perverted poor Clithène. — She pinched my cheek a bit harder — Masoch won’t miss me at the next atonement. He wasn’t very favorable to your integration to begin with.

“But,” I ventured, “let’s just not say anything...”

“No, this I can’t. It would be a denial of everything I’ve done here.”

As I look devastated, she added:

“But don’t worry. Anyway, I’ve been around here for a while. Besides, last week, I really hurt myself at atonement. — She showed me the cut on her hand. — I’m kind of sick of it. And I miss my family. If I terminate and go to Nehushtân, would you come with me?”

“Terminate what? Go where?”

“I forgot you’re a little confused. Nehushtân is our capital. It’s a beautiful city. It’s worth a look for a newcomer like you.”

She gave me a sunny smile. Go with her? Yeah, of course. It's the best way out of this hellhole. I nodded my head a few times, as a sign of approval, kind of like a gentle merry-go-round horse. All the same, I stammered:

"But... you... the brotherhood?"

"Don't worry, I'm terminating. I quit."

"But they may not accept."

She seemed surprised by my question, but didn't stop there. She added:

"Let's do it right now."

She went through my little bedside table, found a pencil and paper and wrote: "I, Clisthène, former abbess, today suspend all membership in the Brotherhood of the Lamb and hereby agree to reinstate the Supplemental Code, until a new adhesion to a particular code." She dated, signed, told me to sign, stating my name and my status as a witness. I hesitated but she winked at me and I signed.

"But what about me?" I dared to ask; "and my integration interview?"

"You don't fit in anymore since you're leaving with me!"

"Ah ok..."

"And then it'll make Marc happy," she added.

"Marc?"

"You know, the cop who wanted to catch you."

It suddenly came back to me. She really didn't seem worried about turning me in.

"But," I said worried, "they're going to punish me for defending the kids attacked by the old filth?"

"Sweetie pie, don't talk like that. – she pulled on my ear – Granny Sodomite is nice, you know. She doesn't hurt anybody. When I was at the Youppys'... I mean, I'll tell you all about it if you want."

I didn't know if I wanted to. I frowned. She gave me the sidelong glance and added:

"A little lawsuit isn't going to stop you from leaving with me, is it?"

I looked at her. Leaving with her was obviously the best solution, but I was taking a hell of a risk.

On the road

Before losing my main point of reference, I discovered their currency, their political organization and what they did to their children in the name of respect owed to others.

The following morning, Clithène's decision had come as a shock. Her cancellation form had put an end to all discussion and everyone had resigned to the fact. Hushai had tears in his eyes. Masoch scratched his forearms and wrung his hands. He seemed the saddest. He took Clithène by the shoulders and said to her, sniffing as if to hold back his tears :

"When you spoke of your impulsion, I had my suspicions. We're going to miss you terribly. With you, the penances were more liberating and joyful than ever..."

He burst into tears and gave her a long kiss on the cheek. Then he limped away from her. Clithène discreetly wiped her dripping cheek. She seemed moved.

Taking advantage of the fact that the attention was focused entirely on them, I discreetly asked Hushai if, now that I was leaving, I could get my clothes back. He glared at me furiously :

"The ridiculous clothes you had on when you arrived ? They were probably transferred to a thrift store for shit-stirrers. You had to fit in, need I remind you. And, by the way, what did you want to do with them ?"

"I... uh... I could've put them back on..."

"You would've worn those disposable clothes ?"

He looked flabbergasted. I preferred not to push it.

"Come on, don't worry, we're not going to make you leave naked, even if it would still be too gentle a penance." He was glowering, but seemed resigned. "You can keep the robes, if that's what this is about."

Clithène had finished her farewell. We climbed into the association's old Renault 4 vehicle. Hushai got behind the wheel to take us to the nearest town. Clithène was in the back with me. She put her head through the window while we started off. I could hear Masoch screaming : "Come back whenever you want !" Clithène was crying while making grand gestures with her hands. After a few sharp bends, she curled up against me.

We watched the bumpy dirt road go by for a while. The road widened little by little. No one spoke. Then, suddenly, Clithène wiped away her tears, looked at me and kissed me greedily under the furious eye of Hushai, who was watching us in the rear-view mirror. She whispered in my ear :

"To adventure, you crazy fool!"

The uneven and bumpy dirt road had improved. In the last few kilometers, it had become a small, well-maintained asphalt road. Forests in development, or in the process of being planted, appeared. The cultivated fields gradually took on the features of modernity, even if curious dissonances could be found here and there. We crossed paths (with some difficulty, as the road remained narrow) with several tractors, two cars of recent appearance, but also a group of horses

pulling a heavy load of hay. A hill covered by a cornfield with perfectly straight and orderly streaks was strangely topped by a medieval castle, on which multicolored pennants were flying.

After a few hours of driving, we stopped in a village composed of small houses with neat plaster and bright colors. I spotted a bakery, a Buddhist temple, a grocery shop, a church... The strangest was the diversity of clothing styles. Some in overalls with big mustaches, others in shorts and Hawaiian shirts, others in sportswear. A 40-year-old with a curly beard, in a dress, babouche and turban, wore a long knife at his belt. This carnival was troubling, but it was also convenient : I was wearing the long white dress of the brotherhood, which was all the more offbeat because I had kept the little apple-green backpack I had taken on the plane to carry my few belongings.

Hushāi and Clithène led me to the terrace of a pub. A few tables were placed next to an old stone fountain, covered with moss. A trickle of water was flowing out of its rusty spout. One of these Chinese trees with long branches and ball-shaped leaves served as an adequate replacement for a plane tree, despite its esoteric appearance and imperfect shade. We sat by the fountain. Clithène breathed a sigh of relief.

Currency and central bank

A waiter came to take the order. I was surprised to hear Hushai order a rillettes-gherkins sandwich and a coffee. Clithène ordered a salad, a slice of blueberry pie and sparkling water. Then she turned to me. The waiter and Hushai did the same : the three of them gave me a questioning look. It was my turn to order. I didn't know what to say. I hesitated and rummaged through my backpack and found my wallet in it. There was some cash in there but more importantly my credit card. With a little more confidence, I pulled out a twenty euro bill and I asked :

“Do you... Do you accept euros ?”

The waiter looked stunned.

Hushai got up and, with a sharp gesture, ripped the bill from my hand:

“What the hell is that ?” he said in a fairly aggressive tone.

“I... a bill...,” I said.

“Do you have more?” — Then, turning to the server, he added — “Excuse him, he's a newcomer, he couldn't have known.”

“Still, still...,” grumbled the waiter.

“So, do you have more ?” Hushai insisted.

I went through my wallet and took out two fifty-euro notes and some coins. Hushai took them from me.

“Please excuse him,” he told the server again, “Do you have a light ?”

The waiter pulled out a matchbox. Hushai struck a match and was about to set my bills on fire. I went to stop him, but Clithène held me back.

“Don't,” she said, “you're in enough trouble as it is.”

I watched helplessly, frightened, as Hushai went about burning my one hundred and twenty euros. Then he gave my handful of coins to the server, telling him:

“Please, if you have a trash can...”

“Sure, of course,” he mumbled.

“But,” I said, appalled, “how am I going to pay if money is forbidden?”

“Don't worry, it'll be my treat,” Clithène answered.

She turned to Hushai and added :

“And you too, don't argue ! It's on me : it's the least I can do.”

Hushai hesitated, but ended up nodding his head.

“So Sébastien, what will you have?” asked Clithène.

As I hesitated, she added :

“And we will stop by to register you as soon as possible.”

I didn't get it. But the look of the waiter was clear : I needed to order something... Encouraged by the rillettes of Hushai, I asked :

“Uh... a ham and cheese sandwich ?”

The waiter didn't seem surprised. He took note and asked :

“And to drink ?”

I looked around, everything was normal and nothing was normal. Although I feared looking like a fool, I gave it a try as I really wanted one and thought they might know of it :

“Uh... Coca-Cola ?

“So, we have coffee, sparkling water, Coke, rillettes and gherkins, ham and cheese, salad and blueberry pie for the lady,” summed up the waiter.

He walked away, but not without giving me a nasty look first.

I didn't dare mention my burnt up bills, but I couldn't think of anything else. Hushai and Clithène also kept silent, as if lost in their thoughts. The big tree that was dominating us was swinging its big balls of leaves above us. I observed the tree while regaining some composure. Its shiny gray bark vaguely reminded me of birch trees. It was its long, thin, gnarled, twisted branches that gave it its oriental appearance.

“A fumens,” Hushai told me distractedly, “it's a fumens”.

“It's with its leaves that we make the fumstea,” Clithène told me. “You remember ? The first time we met, I made you taste it.”

“Right, that,” Hushai grumbled, “we didn't spare anything to welcome you properly. Then we hid you, fed you, protected you, and you...”

“Please, Hush,” Clithène interjected.

From her bag she took out a smartphone, even more amazing than the one I saw at the lecherous old lady's house when I had arrived. Its black metal shell, curved, shiny and scratched with an elegant purple arabesque, impressed me. She tapped the screen for a moment and announced :

“The next bus to Nehushtân leaves in a little over an hour.”

“If you want, I can drive you to Hosea,” suggested Hushai. “From there you could take the train.”

“Thanks, Hush,” answered Clithène with a hand on his shoulder. “But it's far away and it's not really the right direction. I'm not even sure it would save us time. Don't worry about us. We'll take the bus. It was nice of you to bring us all the way out here.”

Hushai shook his head. He looked a bit disappointed : prolonging the path with Clithène was obviously not to displease him.

I got distracted by a tall, pale, twitchy young man who walked by without looking at me. A few meters away from us, he crouched against the edge of the fountain, without paying attention to the green, damp moss that was covering it. I could hear the slightly spongy sound of his body leaning against it. He opened a leather satchel, took out a spoon, a small plastic bag of white powder, a big rubber band, and a syringe. I couldn't believe my eyes. With a nod to Hushai and Clithène I pointed to the scene. They cast a distracted eye. Clithène shrugged her shoulders. Hushai said, sententiously, that to destroy oneself is to destroy the image and the work of God. He was pulling a contemptuous face. The young man was heating some powder in his spoon. I couldn't help but glance at him furtively. I could see him putting on a tourniquet. I turned to my companions to make it clear to them with a look that we couldn't let this happen. But they seemed to have forgotten about the young man : their attention was entirely focused on the server, back with our order. “Ah ! I'm so hungry,” said Clithène, and Hushai couldn't help but rub his hands with satisfaction when his sandwich arrived. The waiter asked if he could be paid right away, because it was almost time for the change of service. I protested : “Don't you see what's going on ?” Following my gaze, everyone turned around in time to see the syringe slowly digging into

the young man's throbbing vein. I saw in disgust that his arm was covered with bruises and that the needle was sticking right next to an infected, purulent wound. The server turned to me :

"What's the matter ?" he asked me.

"Medical assistance and prevention services are very easy to reach," Clithène explained. "You can be sure that he knows about them. I wouldn't be surprised if he's just come out of his weekly medical check-up : he has a brand new bandage on the other arm."

She helped herself to the sparkling water that the waiter had just put on the table.

"Ah ! I was terribly thirsty," she said, enjoying the first sip.

Her indifference shocked me. From my look, the waiter understood.

"First the bills," he sighed, "and now the junkie bothers you. Is that it ?"

"Forgive him," immediately intervened Clithène. "As you have seen, he's a newcomer and he's suffered a serious plane crash..."

"Fine, I don't want another scandal in my establishment."

The waiter reluctantly walked up to the junkie. He whispered a few words and helped him pack up his stuff. He accompanied him a little further on, explaining how sorry he was and thanking him warmly. When he got back, he told me aggressively :

"You really have a nice mentality !" Then he added sharply, "I would like the bill to be settled now."

He held a small metal rod the size of a pen in his hand. Clithène pulled out her kind of cell phone. The man pointed his wand in the direction of the phone. Clithène glanced at the screen and then placed her index finger on it, which caused a slight beep. Then, the waiter walked away hastily, towards the kitchen.

Hushai pointed to the junky now settled a little further away, and said : "So ? Maybe you wanted to attack him? Or maybe give him a couple of banknotes ?"

I was about to protest, but Clithène put her hand on my arm to shut me up, while frowning at Hushai.

"No you don't !" she said. "We're not going to argue about nonsense and an addict passing by !"

She put our hands on each other's and told us with authority : "Come on! Make peace!" Hushai gradually regained his calm. I, too, made an effort. The total indifference towards others seemed here an essential rule that couldn't be transgressed. My misadventure with the old degenerate granny was to serve me a lesson. I had to stop trying to protect all the victims of this absurd system. I had to think about myself and only myself. I shot back to Hushai as friendly a smile as I could. He withdrew his hand from mine, almost with disgust, but he bit into his sandwich as a sign of peace. We were chewing for a few moments, the three of us, in silence.

The payment transaction between metal stick and smartphone came back to me.

"You have suppressed cash but, as I understand it, you kept some sort of unit of account. I mean, you didn't suppress money ?"

"Of course not !" smiled Clithène. "We have money accounts."

"That's not so silly." Hushai sententiously intervened. — Seeing him take up my defense again, as he did before, reassured me. " In 1955, currency was abolished throughout Arcania, following a major referendum."

"And then?" I risked. "What happened ?"

“It was way too complicated. Just to get bread, you had to engage in all kinds of barter. It only lasted a few months, but still, we tried. And it wasn’t the first time, an attempt had already been made in the time of Utopus the Madman.”

“Yes, well, don’t pay too much attention.” Clithène added. Hush used to be a history teacher, and if you get him started... Well, now, if you want to know everything, I’ve just been debited 14 balls.”

“Fourteen ‘balls’ ?”

“Yes, I mean, fourteen winkies.”

Seeing my astonished look, she added :

“Don’t worry, it’s not expensive. When you see the prices in Nehushtân...”

“The ‘balls’ that’s your currency, then?” I asked.

“No, no, it’s slang” said Hushai. “Our currency is the winkle.”

“And what’s wrong with coins, bills, cash ?”

“But, come on, this is extremely dangerous !” protested Hushai.

“For me, that was the first time I’d ever seen any,” Clithène confessed.

“But, before your thing with the wand and your smartphone, how did you pay ?”

“With smart cards.” explained Hushai “And, even before that, with small carved balls of different sizes. It is the memory of the time of these balls that makes us today fear all material money, whether in coins or notes. The balls could be transmitted with the greatest discretion. It had become totally uncontrollable. Criminal organizations had developed, colossal fortunes were made without paying any tax ; gang leaders, politicians, businessmen, all people in power were exchanging suitcases of balls.”

“I went to see some old balls at the Nehushtân memorial.” said Clithène. “Even today, people are uncomfortable seeing them. That’s why they call the winkies ‘balls’: it became slang.”

“In ancient times, we paid in periwinkles. It’s a small shell. It worked until fishing techniques improved and periwinkles disappeared from our shores. And the shells in stock were wearing out quickly. Then the value of the winkle kept rising and it became almost impossible to use it. We started making balls that looked vaguely like shells, which we soon called winkies. All this was abolished in 1973 with the widespread introduction of electronic money. As soon as this technology made it possible, the physical winkies were eliminated. It must also be said that in the time of the wooden winkies, appalling inequalities were created. As soon as the will emerged to set up a reasonable tax rate for the richest people, their entire fortune disappeared in little clandestine balls.”

“That’s why it was better to burn your notes fast.” explained Clithène.

I thought for a moment. These people have a currency, that’s something. But not being able to touch it, not being able to hear the soft rustle of the notes, the weight of the coins in one’s pocket, that can’t be very pleasant. I suddenly realized that it also meant that all operations were visible, transparent. The banker knows everything. Something similar had already begun in France too, with the generalization of transactions by card. But here, they had gone too far. Secret, invisible spending and nothing else... I shuddered.

“With your system,” I said, “all, absolutely all of your spending is transparent. Doesn’t it bother you ?”

“It has to be accounted for,” replied Hushai. “We have a Central fund, a bank if you prefer, which records all transactions. How else could things be done ?”

“A central fund? And only one bank that centralizes everything ? No private banks?”

“Private ? Private, as in ‘privation’ ?”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean. — I was losing hope. — “To pay... that’s all there is ? Only one fund ?”

“Yes, of course,” confirmed Clisthène. “What surprises you ? Do you have several funds ?”

“Oh yes! There are a lot of them.”

A sexually deranged granny, a sadomasochistic sect, a junky shooting up in full view of everyone, without provoking any reaction, banknote burners and now a single central cash desk that knows and records everything. A banking Big Brother. They think they are free to play in their small, deranged communities. But nothing escapes the ‘Great Fund’. It knows who buys candy, who was where, at what time, who buys books or not, who cheated on his wife and in what hotel. And moreover, Hushai didn’t even understand when I said private. Maybe privacy has no meaning here anymore ? These disguises, these cults, these drugs, they’re just safety valves. As long as the Fund is not threatened, it lets them wriggle around like excited little fish in their aquarium who think they are free under the eye of the almighty master. The modern face of totalitarianism. Banking totalitarianism.

Hushai seems to have thought about it, too. He asks me, perplexed :

“But then, how do you do things in France ? How can the same account be in more than one bank ?”

“At home, we may very well have multiple accounts. Let me try to explain.”

“Several personal accounts?”

“Yes, of course.”

“But I am one person, there’s only one me!”

Hushai touched his chest, his ribs and showed me his phalanges, as if to show me that he had only one body and only one kind of fingerprints. I was facing a cultural problem.

“Well, having one single account is still acceptable,” I said, “but you could at least have a choice of bank. There are many banks there, and everyone chooses the one they prefer.”

“But, what if you want to trade with someone who has an account at another bank?” objected Clisthène.

“Not a problem,” I explained, “in that case, banks can trade with each other. And then there is a big top bank, a great reserve or fund, to which all local cash registers refer to.”

I was smiling on the inside. I felt like I was trying to make some little barbarians understand the basics of my old finance 101 classes. I hoped they understood.

“Actually, it’s kind of the same with us,” said Hushai. “There are all kinds of local branches ; only the recording of transactions is centralized by the Central Fund.”

“That’s where it’s different in France, our banks are independent,” I said. “They have their own policies, their own rates. That way, for example, you can choose the one that provides the best service, or the one that charges the least.”

“You pay to have an account ? But that is a fundamental right! Every individual has the right to have an account ; to charge for it would be...”

“There must be a way to make some profit for our banks, though. Otherwise they couldn’t exist. That’s the price of their independence. Of course, if your Great Fund is a kind of state public service, it could be free. But then, that would be a terrible machine. We would never accept such domination by the State.”

“The State, what’s that?” asked Clisthène.

“It’s our sovereign central authority.”

“A sovereign central authority!” exclaimed Hushai, “but that’s horrible ! Do you really have such a thing ? It’s a good thing that it doesn’t know the contents of your account !”

“Hmm, actually it does,” I had to admit ; “the State has access to all bank accounts... But, uh... they have to ask permission for it... “Anyway, let me remind you that we can pay discreetly, in cash, with bills... And, like that, everyone can remain discreet, buy a sex toy, rent a room...”

“Oh, that ! We too know of small discreet transactions” intervened Clithène with a smile. “There are companies that disguise hotel rooms as something else, as a bicycle or as book purchases.”

“I’m not surprised you know about this kind of stuff,” sighed Hushai.

“And you can also pay in tinker or in quails...” Clithène continued without paying attention to the remark.

“Tinker? Quails?”

“Yes, and at the Yuppies, we even kept accounts in jiggles. In our fraternity, it was the sacrifices. Everyone had to work five hours a day, the ‘sacrificial hours’. But some people traded them in. And we used to count everything in ‘sacrifs’.”

Now that she told me, it reminded me very vaguely of something. But I couldn’t quite grasp it :

“Each association has its own currency ? !”

“No,” conceded Clithène ; “many associations do not have personal accounts. And even when they do, most often they don’t keep them properly, so they become confusing.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” said Hushai ; “in any case, the community accounts must be regularly reset to zero. At the fraternity, the reset is quarterly. But a more sustainable accumulation is possible. I believe the maximum duration is one year.”

My eyes bulged.

“But this is absurd. Nobody could accept to be paid with this kind of money that disappears ! Especially if you’re getting close to resetting the accounts ? !”

“On the contrary, it’s very rewarding to be in profit at the end of the quarter,” Hushai objected. “It’s a sign that you’ve given more to the association than you’ve received. In some systems, those who make regular profits receive small symbolic rewards. Sometimes, at the end of the cycle, those in deficit organize a big party where they invite the beneficiaries to symbolically settle the accounts.”

“Still,” I said, “I can’t believe it works.”

Clithène seemed surprised by my difficulty to understand.

“Surely, you wouldn’t suggest that sacrifices could be piled up into big amounts that would last for your entire life ?” she asked me.

“Only the winkle, guaranteed by the Fund, is sustainable,” confirmed Hushai. “Sacrifices, quails and other currencies are above all a way of making small exchanges without paying taxes. So the Fund tolerates them, provided that these small communal arrangements produce only fragile and non-accumulating currencies. Otherwise, it would be too easy to avoid taxes.”

“I think I understand very well, on the contrary,” I said haughtily. “Your vaguely monetized means of exchange fool no one. For the most part, you have only one currency.”

“Yes, thankfully,” nodded Hushai.

“And so, essentially, all your expenses are transparent to the Great Fund, which knows everything and sees everything. And I imagine that it can also read your e-mails, your text messages, look at your connections, your social networks and...”

“Someone reading emails that weren’t sent to him ?” Clithène blushed. “But that’s definitely impossible !”

“You are very naive,” I replied. “Nothing escapes the big intelligence agencies, such as the NSA in the United States or its counterparts in China, France or the United Kingdom. They swallow everything on the Net and they can sort it out. They read e-mails and social media accounts; they listen to mobile phone conversations. They can find out everything about our communications !”

“Ah yes, I’ve heard of this kind of eavesdropping,” thoughtfully admitted Hushai. “We had a few scandals at the beginning of the Net, in the 1980s, and again when mobile phones became widespread. But that’s all over now. All our communications have been encrypted for a long time. I’m not familiar with the technique, but it uses prime number factors and a number from fingerprint analysis. The recipient’s flashphone is the only device that can read the message.”

“I’m sure that nothing is resistant to hackers and even less so to the intelligence agencies !” I explained.

Hushai made a doubtful pout. He told me it’s still easier to build a cipher than it is to break it. I agreed. He asked me how our messages were encrypted in France. I explained to him that they are not, that we have email passwords, but that our ISP or email provider can retrieve everything. And that our phone conversations are not encrypted either.

Hushai and Clithène looked scared. We stayed a moment without saying anything. Finally, it was Hushai who summed up :

“So if I understand correctly, in your country financial flows can be totally opaque, especially with cash, but messages, discussions and social networks are totally transparent. Here at home, it is exactly the opposite.”

I took some time to meditate on this strangeness.

“That said,” continued Hushai, looking at a pocket watch he took out of his pocket, “if you don’t want to miss your bus, you’d better get going.”

We left the bar and walked through the streets of Clabourg. I didn’t know if it was our discussion, but I felt a certain tension rising between Hushai and myself. I gave him a few furtive glances, but he had withdrawn into his thoughts and seemed not to see me anymore. I tried to think of something else by looking at the bright colors of the walls and the motley clothing of the inhabitants. Suddenly, Hushai stopped me. His face was solemn.

“Debourg, in a few minutes, you’ll be leaving with our abbes. — he swallowed. — but, before you get on the bus, I owe you a confession. I’m the one who was tasked with arresting you. Remember ? When you got here, I hunted you and caught you. From that moment on, my duty was clear. The hunter cannot be the executioner. You had been my target, you, a human brother. To atone, I had to defend you, support you, protect you.”

“Yes, you’ve been constantly supportive, helpful. My gratitude...”

I was about to get close to him, but he brutally stopped me :

“Stay there ! I just wanted to tell you, before you go, that it was only an *obligation*. By defending you, I did *penance*. I always felt deep down inside who you were. I guessed you’d come to pervert our peaceful order. And, indeed, after only two days, you betrayed us. We protected you, fed you, housed you, and now you’re going to wallow in filth with our Holy Lady !”

His face showed disgust ; he was clenching his fists. I just stood there for a dumb moment when suddenly he took a step forward. Oh my God ! I took two steps back, ready to run away.

Clisthène stepped in, looking at him. While he hesitated, she threw herself into his big arms and hugged him hard. Her tiny body seemed to disappear in the imposing corpulence of the monk. Hushai's big gray and red beard trembled under the emotion, and all of a sudden he seemed awkward. He didn't know what to do with his big paws, which remained in the air, indecisive. He finally put them gently on the frail shoulders of his beautiful abbess, without loosening his fists. Clisthène freed herself a little, looked at him, then, fiercely, she clung to his hair with both hands, drew his large, distraught face to hers and kissed him on the lips. I thought the giant would collapse in shock. I myself didn't feel right at all.

Clisthène slowly detached herself from Hushai. He was lost. He just managed to loosen his fists. Clisthène smiled at him and whispered :

"You big fool, I liked you too. In any other association, I would have..." She winked at him. Hushai was going to talk, but Clisthène put her finger on his lips. Then, gently, but firmly, she pushed him away : "But now, you understand, you have to leave us."

Hushai just stood there, bewildered, motionless. He tried to make a gesture. Clisthène interrupted him in a firmer, more authoritative tone, reminiscent of her former role :

"Sébastien and I are going to go to the bus, alone. And you, you're going to go back to the car and to the brotherhood."

As Hushai stood still, she added : "You will have quite a few things to tell them at the next confession..."

This seemed to bring the red giant out of his torpor. A shadow of a smile appeared on his lips.

"Oh yes... at the next one and the following ones... I will confess my thoughts for you, my abbess ; I will confess for weeks, months, my whole life..."

"And you will be punished. Severely, I'm sure," added Clisthène benevolently.

"Yes ! Oh yes ! I have sinned !"

"Yes, my good Hushai, you have sinned."

He kneeled at Clisthène's feet. She kissed him on the forehead. She told him that it was no longer up to her to punish him. That she, too, would think of him from time to time. She bid him farewell. She beckoned him to get up. He cried. We then parted ways, his in one direction, ours in another.

No sooner had Hushai left our sight than Clisthène stopped me. She threw herself on me, kissed me greedily, deeply, hugging me, caressing me. Then she said : "Come ! We'll take another bus ! Hushai got me too excited. And I need to celebrate this release from the Brotherhood"

She grabbed my hand firmly and led me to the cafe where we were previously. She went straight to the waiter, got a room number, a key, directions, and an amused look from him. At the back of the cafe, a thick wooden staircase led us upstairs. Clisthène hadn't let go of my hand.

The room was small. Its tapestry was covered with small country drawings. It was slightly loose in places. I saw a washbasin, a bedside table, a bed covered with a large orange blanket. I felt a caress on the back of my neck, then down my dress, on to my back. I had goosebumps, my heart was pounding. Clisthène took off her dress with a single gesture. I started to remove mine, but I got entangled in its canvas and remained stuck, blinded, my legs unveiled. I wasn't given time to free myself from this wardrobe trap. Clisthène immobilized me by firmly grabbing my balls. She threw me on the bed. The wool blanket was a little itchy, but I was firmly in her grip and dared not move. I felt the warmth of her hand, of her mouth, the firmness of her lips. She scratched me. I was afraid I'd come right away. My skin tensed all over like a drum. I felt her put a condom on me that she had apparently pulled out of thin air, straddle me and make

me penetrate her. With a sudden burst of energy, I succeeded in taking my dress off. Stirred up, reared up, she rode me and shook me. Drool trickled out of her pink mouth, which was open, panting. At this sight, I came almost instantly. She felt it, put down her hand and masturbated brutally, my sex still inside her. She screamed.

It couldn't have been more than a minute since we entered the room.

She woke me up by sticking to me. She stroked me, caressed herself, rubbed her prickly little sex on my thigh. I was drained, but she went on and on without paying too much attention to my condition. To my surprise, I felt hard again, at first vaguely, then not so faintly. I couldn't believe it: a second time? I wouldn't have thought myself capable of it. But there I was, getting started again. She incited me, made me turn, guided me. Time stretched out. I forgot myself, got carried away and collapsed again.

When I reopened an eye, she was against me, wide awake. Night was falling. I called her 'my love', swore to stay with her all my life. She laughed, shook me a little, and got up. She caressed her breasts. I stood still looking at her. She picked up the room phone, ordered food, drinks and coffee.

She kept me awake most of the night. I no longer had a hard-on, but my hands, my mouth, my skin, my breath, they were all for her and her games.

The sun shone through the sheets my head was buried in. My mouth was doughy. I must have snored again. The heat of the day made my eyes squint with pleasure. I groped for a warm body. No one. I was seized by a pang of anguish. I sat up in bed. I opened my eyes with difficulty. Still no one. I called out cautiously, not too loud, just in case: "Clisthène ?" It didn't make much sense, the room was very small and there was no bathroom. She wasn't there. I rushed out of bed and looked around. A note was waiting for me on the table, hastily scribbled : "Go back to sleep, *loco*. I'll be back in a minute." A breath of happiness overcame me. I was her 'loco', her crazy fool.

I stuck my head back in the sheets where the smell of my abbess was everywhere. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep like a baby.

"Come on, get up ! Old locomotive ! — she was shaking me gently — Enough snoring, my cuddly bear. Get up or I'll get you chastised !"

She was scratching my shoulder a little bit. I opened my eyes. I was *her* cuddly bear, *her* locomotive. That was wonderful. On the table, there was a praline bun, two bowls and a big pot of coffee. I sat up in bed. The coffee was lukewarm, clear and bitter, but it went wonderfully well with the bun. It was delicious. Besides, everything was sublime in this country, their faith, their rules, their Central Fund, their disguises, their penances and their sandwiches.

Clisthène went to find herself new clothes : a light dress with red flowers and a ribboned hat. She was a new woman, even more sublime than the abbess was. I looked at her in wonder. I put on my big rough canvas dress and my green backpack. She looked at me, laughed a little and kissed me. She told me that I would have to redo my look when we got to Nehushtân. She added

that she wouldn't be able to take care of my expenses forever and that it was better to do the formalities right away. We'd take the bus later.

She took me to a kind of grocery store, half a wholesaler if I judged by the size of its bags of beans, noodles and rice open everywhere. At the counter, an old, blowing computer, attached to a screen from the 1990s, as thick as it was wide, was stuck between the sugar and the coffee. The boss, a small, white-haired man in an apron, asked me for all sorts of information, which he entered as he went along on his keyboard. When he learned where I was coming from, his curiosity was heightened. He wanted to ask me how, in my country... But Clithène interrupted him, mentioning the bus schedule, and people who were supposedly waiting for us. She said that I was a newcomer, who arrived less than forty-eight hours ago, taken in by the Brotherhood of the Lamb and in search of integration. The grocery store owner asked :

“Do you intend to stay ? This is not a simple tourist tour?”

“I told you, he wants to stay and settle down with us. He's a newcomer !” Clithène answered for me.

“I am addressing you, sir.” The grocer said with a frown.

Clithène was clear. She thought I was going to move in with her. Maybe permanently... Caught up in a rush, I told the grocer that yes, I wanted to stay, for a long time, for life, I hoped. The grocer asked me if I had ever been to Arcania. I told him no, that it was the first time. He mumbled to himself : “Then it is indeed a newcomer account.” He took my fingerprints on a small glittering scanner, which looked state-of-the-art, quite different from the rest of his equipment. Then he told me to look into a lens that emitted a small click. He asked me : “Would you like me to individualize your flashphone?” I told him I don't know what a 'flashphone' was. He showed me his smartphone. I reached into my bag and pulled out my fancy phone, with some pride. He told me that he thinks it should be possible to customize these old models, but that he can't do it. I took advantage of this and asked him if we could find a charger for my device. He looked at it a little closer, grimaced. He told me probably not. But maybe in an antique salvage yard in Nehushtân...

“In the meanwhile,” he said, “would you like a fridge?”

“A fridge?” I asked, surprised. “But for what ? What's...?”

Clithène put her hand on my shoulder, to shut me up, and quickly answered for me :

“Of course. He needs a fridge.”

The grocer was walking away to his back shop, and I took the opportunity to ask Clithène : “But what am I gonna do with a fridge ?”

“Don't worry, as soon as you get to Nehushtân, you can get rid of it. But in the meantime, it's still convenient and it's free.”

The grocer came back with a small box, from which he took out a mobile phone that looked a bit like mine, but significantly smaller. He turned it on, tapped it a little and handed it to me. I kept it in my hand, taken aback.

Clithène explained :

“It's lame. But hey, you know, to pay and everything, it'll help you out.”

“As a newcomer,” added the grocer, “you are entitled to a payment to cover your basic needs for the first few months.”

“You give money to all the foreigners who arrive ?” I asked, incredulous.

“ 'Foreigners' ?” Repeated the grocer without understanding.

“Yes, to anyone who doesn't have your nationality ?”

“ ‘Nationality’?”

“Well, I mean the ones that don’t belong to your ‘Arcania’ or ‘misarchy’.”

“Nobody ‘belongs’ to Arcania.”

“And you are letting in anyone?”

“Any human beings can sign up, of course.”

He turned to Clithène, taken aback. She told him that I come from far away and that I use exotic words, which she herself does not always understand. But she added that they are singing, musical words, probably related to the sounds of nature. She looked at me with such tenderness that I didn’t dare contradict her. Articulating slowly, the grocer started to address me again :

“It’s the first time you’ve entered Arcanian normativity. And, as for any newcomer, you are entitled to an integration allowance.”

I didn’t insist, and nodded.

“But be careful,” went on the grocer, “that nest egg won’t be renewed. You will have to quickly consult a labor exchange and take out a union membership. You understand ?”

Clithène is waving me off. “That’s only a formality”, she told me.

The grocer was typing something on his machine and asked me to put my fingers back on his scanner. I reluctantly obeyed. Still, I asked him who was using all this data. He answered that it was to register and to identify me. I insisted, telling him that I was not so naive and that I had understood that there was someone or something running everything, that I just wanted to know who it was. The grocer didn’t seem to understand my question. Clithène told him that where I came from, customs were very simple, but that he shouldn’t worry : she would take care of me. The owner nodded his head, understanding. Clithène told him : “Thank you very much, decacilor”, and she kissed him on both cheeks. I was amazed, but I was too afraid I would be ridiculous if I asked for anything else. I thanked him carefully. Clithène tapped me on the shoulder and congratulated me :

“That’s it, you’ve got your Fund account! You’re going to be able to cope on your own.”

An account ? I hadn’t even shown my I.D. or signed anything. I’d just been flashed, measured, recorded. I felt both affected in my body and shocked by the lack of proper writing.

The bus seemed normal, rather modern even. To enter, Clithène beckoned me to put my index finger on a screen above which fares were written.

“You have your account, you can pay for your ticket,” she explained. “It’s only two winkies and it will be good practice for you. Just press with your index finger on your destination... there... We’re going to Nehushtân...”

Upon contact with my finger, the device emitted a small aggressive beep. Clithène congratulated me :

“Well done ! Perfect ! Now, out of the way, there are other people who want to get on.”

I knew what I had done was not insignificant. I was now fully integrated into their grand control system. Clithène laughed at my concern, as if I were a savage frightened by his first contact with modern technology. Her recklessness bordered on unconsciousness. But I didn’t dare protest.

Once I was sitting down, I had trouble spotting the driver's seat. At least, it was not in the front seat. Maybe underneath the passengers, a cabin close to the ground... I asked Clithène where the driver was, and she chuckled a little. As I looked a little upset, she added quickly :

"Don't worry, it's an automatic bus, like most buses." Seeing my eyes widen, she added, "It works great."

I explained to her that at home, buses... She interrupted me and told me that here too, there were still buses with drivers, for the folklore. And that I shouldn't worry.

The bus was two-thirds full. It looked like a school bus as there were so many children on it. If by some ill luck they started singing, this trip would be hell.

The seats were organized in squares of four seats. We managed to sit in the back, in a corner free of screaming children. In front of us sat a slightly plump, Asian-looking man in his fifties. He wore an elegant gray suit, a thin mustache and a small black billy goat, perfectly groomed. This aristocratic hair and clothing made him look like a Mongolian officer with a brilliant career in diplomacy. He greeted us with a nod of his head and discreetly plunged back into reading his newspaper. The seriousness of this man reminded me of the absurdity of my big dress and green bag. I was all the more embarrassed since as soon as I sat down, Clithène stroked my cheek, kissed me gently, then put her head on my shoulder. What was this distinguished Asian man going to think of a man like me, middle-aged, in a sort of priest's robe, hooking up with such a young woman... I didn't know where to put myself anymore. But I didn't dare dismiss Clithène either. Luckily, I was not likely to meet anyone I knew in this country.

The road was winding its way through lush green hills, cultivated with care. Clithène looked distractedly at the passing landscape. It would take us several hours on the road, judging by the screen hanging in front, on which the stops and their schedules were scrolling. The kids kept talking, swapping seats... But I must admit that they were relatively quiet.

Half out of curiosity, half to integrate myself into the flow of the surrounding conversations, I interrupted Clithène in her landscape reveries and I asked :

"Who was that guy who set me up with my account ? A grocer or a banker ?"

"He was one of the decacilors from Clabourg, the village we're from. That's why he can open accounts. But I have a feeling he's mostly a grocer."

"A decacilor-grocer ?"

"Yes. Clabourg is a village with decacilors."

Clearly, the authorities of this country were difficult to grasp. A great abbess, a sort of pseudo-policeman amateur and now some decacilor-grocers who are also vaguely bankers. In hope of an explanation that would give me some order, I decided to question Clithène.

Districts, associations, random drawing, and other tools of State dislocation

“And what’s a ‘decacilor’ ?” I asked her first.

“Well, the decacilors are elected. There are ten of them and together they make the day-to-day decisions in the management of the district.”

“A kind of great abbot ?”

Clisthène looked at me and shook her head :

“But no, totally unrelated ! What are you saying here ?”

“Well sorry, I thought you were calling your chief abbots.”

“Clabourg is not a monastery or a brotherhood ! Besides, when I was an abbess, I was not the chief ! It was more complicated, you know. — As I opened my eyes, she added- You are completely lost, my poor darling. You better stop beating yourself up. — she ran her hand through my hair. — Enjoy the scenery...”

“Well, I’m having a hard time figuring out how everything works around here.”

My discouraged tone earned me a little kiss on the cheek and some explanations:

“In fact, it’s simple. There are associations you join and leave whenever you want. Like the Brotherhood of the Lamb, or, I don’t know, a bowling league, a union, or a dairy cooperative, a religion...”

“Religions are associations ?”

“Yes, since you can get in and out just by deciding to.”

What a funny way to look at ‘association’. While we’re at it, I tried:

“And your economic groups, your companies, you also call them ‘associations’?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Then, your bosses are heads of association ?”

“ ‘Bosses’ ? What’s that?”

I gave a sign of discouragement. She watched with tenderness :

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand everything, sweetie, who cares?”

She was kissing me again. It soothed me a little, but still, I cowered. Clisthène shrugged her shoulders and turned to the window.

The Mongolian officer sitting right in front of us took an eye out of his journal :

“Excuse me,” he said, addressing me, “I am confused, but in spite of myself, I understood that you were new to our Arcania. If you wish, I can give you some explanations : I know a bit about politics. Let me introduce myself : Chung-Su Joseon, former top-level tracker, former virtual guild master at Geekcity, back to a more individual-familial existence.”

“Sébastien Debourg, uh... I’m from France.”

“From France ? But it’s fantastic ! Ah ! The Eiffel tower ! The Champs-Élysées ! The Bourgogne !”

This man knew France ! It was like a big breath of fresh air. Plus, he didn't seem to mind my grotesque outfit or my relationship with my neighbor. Politely, Clithène introduced herself too :

“Clithène Ben Mabrouk, former member of the Yuppies, abbess of the Brotherhood of the Lamb until yesterday, left for new possibilities in Nehushtân. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you and flattered to make your acquaintance Madam Honorary Abbess,” the man replied, bowing slightly.

They both looked each other in the eye and shook hands over the small metal table that was separating our seats. I just learned Clithène's last name from surprise : Ben Mabrouk. So far, nothing had led me to believe that she could have oriental origins. Although on closer inspection, her black hair, amber skin tone...

Joseon carefully folded his newspaper in four and seemed to be waiting for my questions. I took a look at Clithène. She sent a sign to our neighbor, as if to thank him for taking charge of my education. I took advantage of this and started :

“I must admit that I would be very happy if you could explain to me a little about the functioning of the institutions in your country.”

“With pleasure,” started Joseon, “first of all, we don't really have institutions. We have organizations, communities, if you prefer. There are two types, the ‘associations’ and the ‘districts’. Associations are purely voluntary groups, which you join by membership, freely. Districts are defined by a territory. All those who live within the geographic boundaries of a district are included in that district. Specifically, if you stay at least four months of the year in one place, you belong to the district of that place. Sometimes it's much less. In some district, the second you move in, you are a member of the district.

“ ‘Associations’ that we adhere to and ‘districts’ that we live in,” I repeated aloud to make sure I followed.

“Exactly ! This difference is naturally found again when it comes to getting out of the group. To get out of an association, all you have to do is resign or terminate membership. It is a simple act of will. It is possible to require a few forms, such as the signature of a register or the presence of a witness, but that is all. To leave a district, it's more difficult : you have to move. This can be expensive, difficult especially if you are integrated into your neighborhoods. This is why membership of a district is considered imperative, while membership of an association is free.”

“So you have some free groups and some more restricted ones.”

“Absolutely. Each of these organizations has its advantages and disadvantages. Let's take the associations for starters. Everyone is free to leave an association. But, conversely, an association can set conditions for membership and, if there is a problem, it can also exclude a member. The exclusion must be sufficiently justified and controls are carried out by the courts. Nevertheless, exclusion from an association is possible. This can be violent. In a district, it's quite different. Anyone who lives within the jurisdiction of a district is required to be a member of the district, which reduces his or her freedom. But, conversely, the district cannot exclude any of its members. This is essential, especially for solidarity districts.”

“ ‘Solidarity’ districts ?”

“The districts are very diverse. There are basin districts that group together all the inhabitants of the same hydraulic basin, in order to manage the drinking water network ; road districts ; building districts that group together all the inhabitants of a building ; even lift districts, which are specialized in the management of a single lift... The Central Fund that manages all the accounts in

winkies is a district, since it affects all the Arcanians. The High Court, which is the third instance court for matters relating to fundamentals throughout Arcania, is still a district. The activities of the police are also districts, of course. 'Solidarity' districts are the ones that organize the collection of funds to finance fundamental goods, such as health, education, security, communication..."

"I am having a hard time keeping up with you. You called 'districts' both private and public organizations."

"Private ? Public ? I don't quite understand that distinction."

"You said that a district could be the condominium staircase that leads to apartments in a building as... as your High Court of justice !"

"Correct ! In either case, all the inhabitants of a place are concerned. In the first case, it is the inhabitants of the building, which makes a small district. In the second case, all the inhabitants of Arcania. It's a very large district."

"You could at least set aside the districts that are State bodies."

"But we don't have a State !"

"You have a High Court, a Central Fund, a police force... these are functions that are run by the State."

"-Not in Arcania. Each of these functions is managed by an independent district. Moreover, to guarantee this, the global districts, those which have jurisdiction over the whole of Arcania, are forbidden to group together or associate. The independence of each of them guarantees the absence of sovereign or centralized power, and even the absence of any claim to sovereignty."

"Well, with the multiplication of your authorities, your so-called independent 'districts', it must be unmanageable."

"Multiplicity of powers is always more complex than their unity. Nothing is simpler, at least on paper, than an all-powerful leader who has all the powers. But nothing is more frightening. As the saying goes, it is impossible to be a slave to two masters. The division of powers seems essential to us."

"But for us too !"

"Then why do you want to pretend that they're all united ? You like divided powers and you unite them in the same State, in the same sovereignty ? Isn't that rather the contradictions that you like ?"

The question annoyed me, but Joseon continued in a tone so measured and benevolent that it was difficult for me to scowl.

"We have about 20 global districts," continued Joseon. "These are the competent districts throughout Arcania. The main ones are collecting or funding districts. One of the largest sets and collects the common tax. But another district finances the police, another finances health, yet another finances education... There is also the Central Fund... and each of these districts is independent of the others."

"But all these independent authorities, it's not necessarily democratic," I said. "We also have an independent central bank, competent for the whole of the European Union. But it is run by technocrats appointed by the Member States."

"District officers appointed by other district officers? How awful ! We do not accept indirect elections, let alone the idea that district officers can be appointed by officers from other districts. If two districts join together, to form a third, it is the inhabitants of these districts together, and they alone, who will elect the decacilors, will be drawn by lot, will sit in the comitia..."

"The 'comitia' ?"

“These are assemblies to which all the inhabitants of a district are invited... General assemblies or people’s assemblies, if you prefer. They exist in most small districts. In large districts, of course, this becomes impractical. Beyond a certain number of inhabitants, districts must have an assembly drawn by lot.”

“Drawn by lot ?”

“Drawing lots is done according to the quota method, so that there are as many women as men, that all ages and all socio-professional categories are represented.”

“As for opinion polls ?”

“Yes we also have polls... But answering a poll on the street or on the phone, quickly, with a simple question, is not the same thing as making a decision, debated, thoughtful. Rather than giving importance to polls, to which people respond in a bit of a haphazard way, we prefer to give importance to the real decisions, made after deliberation by our randomly selected meetings.”

“Still, you’re relying on people who may be completely incompetent.”

“That’s why most large districts also have elected assemblies. Election produces a strict selection. In practice, to run for office with a chance of being elected, it is best to have been active in the matters dealt with by the district. But some are elected simply because of their education or expertise in that area. Among the elected representatives, there are therefore many experts. This is an advantage... but also brings disadvantages. Elected officials easily become imbued with their skills and power. And they distance themselves from the will of the people. As for the assemblies drawn by lot, the risk is demagoguery. Hence the need to have both, so that the disadvantages of one are offset by the presence of the other. The last word is usually given to the assemblies drawn by lot, in the name of the already strong influence exercised by the elected assembly. Sometimes common agreement is required. In the end, the only solution that is excluded is to give the last word to the elected representatives. Every time this has been tried, the assembly drawn by lot has found itself in a subordinate position and has ceased to be sufficient counter-powers. Obviously all this is quite simplified. In order to do it properly, I would have to talk to you about committees of proposals, tribunes, spokespersons, referendum petitions and a few other institutions that can have a say in the decision-making process. But, then, a distinction should be made according to the type of district.

“Even your central bank, I mean your ‘Fund’, is run by elected and randomly drawn assemblies?”

“Naturally.”

With a central bank tossed around between politicians and demagogues, I could imagine the monetary chaos in which they had to struggle. But I preferred not to insist, in order to finally get a good understanding of their institutions.

“It’s hard to imagine that your kinds of independent authorities don’t end up getting organized, becoming hierarchical, and eventually turning into a state,” I nodded. “Look, for example, you must pay tax isn’t ?”

“Of course.”

“And there’s one district that collects taxes and finances the others districts ?”

“Some districts have their own funding. But you’re right, there are large mandatory levies that go into the Great Common Fund, which is one of our global districts.”

“So your Great Fund is therefore in a position of strength...”

“It’s a powerful district, especially since it’s one of the few that can’t split up. It is therefore particularly supervised and controlled. In addition to several elected assemblies drawn by lot, it

must have its major decisions ratified by referendum ; the renewal of its elected representatives is annual and..."

"Being very democratic doesn't mean you can't be dominant," I noticed.

"You're right. We have several rules to try to avoid such a drift. The most important one is the five-year negotiation : every five years, the Great Common Fund organizes negotiations with the twelve districts responsible for financing the twelve essential functions, which are insufficiently financed by themselves, such as education, police or communication networks. And a unanimous agreement between these twelve districts and the Common Fund is needed to determine the distribution.

"But it must be appalling hard !" I said.

"Indeed ! These big negotiations last for months. Between two major five-year negotiations, the previous year's distribution is simply maintained, adjusted for inflation."

"I imagine there are frequently naysayers who refuse everything."

"Given the problems created by the lack of agreement, blockers are easily deselected."

"Deselected ?"

"After a petitioner proposal, any elected official can be subject to a vote of no confidence and new elections are held. When an elected representative loses his mandate in this way, he is said to be 'deselected'. There is also the fear of popular referendums of counter-decision."

"And if, nevertheless, there is no agreement ? It must happen from time to time..."

"The Central Fund opens lines of credit. But these lines are always less than what can be obtained from the Common Fund... which encourages agreement. Not to mention the fact that the same voters elect the assemblies of the different districts under negotiation. If they want this budget to increase massively, they only have to elect assemblies in the other districts ready to make sacrifices. And even if the electoral results are, as is often the case, a little inconsistent, it is only a matter of finding an agreement at thirteen : the twelve basic functions and the financing district. With enough time and good will, it can be done."

"I recognize that this organization may be a little too fragmented to be called a state... However, you must have some kind of original power, first of all... If this or that function has not been assigned to this or that district, what happens ? Who has jurisdiction in principle when no district is expressly in charge ?"

"Our communes."

"This word, 'commune' sounds familiar," I said.

"These are our basic districts. They have that general, principled jurisdiction you were talking about. When a problem that concerns the community is not dealt with by a special, particular organization, it is up to the commune to deal with it. This can be dangerous ! Of course, the major functions of authority are held by specialized districts. This is the case for the police, education, justice... But, for the other functions, sometimes some districts are missing. And, as in the absence of a special district, the competence lies with the commune... Some communes are real catch-all. I have personally seen a commune which was in charge of the road system, the swimming pool and the loan of premises for associations ! With such confusions of powers, obviously, the risk of seeing local potentates appear is increasing."

Their 'communes' are starting to sound pretty bizarre :

"A village can be a 'commune' ?" I asked him to check.

"Yes, absolutely," confirmed Joseon. "Clabourg, where we come from, is a commune."

Well, that made me feel a little better.

“In France, we also have communes, do you know ? Some even say we have too many and too small. There are tens of thousands of them, of all sizes...”

“But it’s just the same here, dear sir. The size of our communes is very diverse. Some are simple hamlets, others are whole towns or parts of towns, or mountains. The largest are hundreds of square kilometers in size and have several tens of thousands of inhabitants. The smallest are no larger than a few tens of hectares. They may even be simple buildings...”

“Simple buildings ? Excuse me, but... French communes are of very, very variable sizes... But not to this point. If a commune can be a building as well as a neighborhood, as well as a city..., it’s not very rational.”

“That’s the point !” He proudly endorsed. “No rationality, of course ! Could you imagine ? A rational organization of space. And which would be subject to the rationality of who ? I am asking you. What oppression !”

“But then, how do you determine the size of your ‘communes’ ?”

The voluntarist space

“The residents decide. I remind you that communes are districts. Inhabitants decide the size and organization of all their districts. They therefore also decide the size and organization of their communes.”

“How come ?” I asked, surprised, “I thought it was impossible to leave a district without moving...”

“Individually, that’s right. But, collectively, it’s perfectly possible to organize a split. To merge or split, all you need is 15% of the interested residents to request a vote. If the majority of those interested agree, the split is set in motion. If the vote is confirmed one year later, the split becomes effective.

“Some kind of referendums ?”

“Exactly. For a merger, the agreement of each of the two territories involved is required. For a split, on the other hand, it is enough for those who want to leave to decide so.

“And those who are abandoned have nothing to say ?”

“Correct!”

“This must be divisive...”

“No doubts, but in a couple, it only takes one of the two to want to leave and the union no longer makes much sense. Moreover, in Arcania, we do not like districts that are too big. They easily generate constituted powers.”

“So your districts must be very small...”

“It’s sometimes the case. I was telling you about the elevator districts. Some districts just share a path, even a common wall. “But there are also big ones : we cannot forbid those who want to group together to do so... And in some regions, they do not deprive themselves ! However, some district sizes are regulated. For example, you need at least 200 hectares or 200 inhabitants to form a commune. As you can see, for a building to become its own commune, it must be a very large building. In rural areas, on the other hand, a few dozen inhabitants can form their own commune, but only if they cover an area of at least 200 hectares. You see, the freedom of organization is limited.”

“It doesn’t seem so to me. It must be unbearable even. I imagine a pool that belongs to a commune... If the commune splits up every two or three years, we’ll end up not knowing whose pool it is...”

“They could then create a pool district, suggests Joseon. But I grant you, some splits are a little complicated to manage, as in any divorce. Mergers are easier. That said, our districts are rather too rigid than too flexible. The Arcanians are so traditionalist ! They are getting used to their commune ; worse, they sometimes identify with it. In practice, requests for mergers or splits are rare and the communes are almost immutable. We only count a few hundred self-determination referendums per year, out of more than twenty thousand communes... And many of them fail. As you can see, we are a long way from the hopes that were raised by the generalization of self-determination in the 18th century...”

“I imagine that while a split can be organized in one commune, this is not possible for all districts. A group of inhabitants cannot secede from your Central Fund or your education district.”

“Actually, yes ! These districts could very well be split.”

“But it’s crazy ! A split of the Central Fund, it would mean a new currency...”

“Absolutely, absolutely. That would be a very big change. This is probably why no split vote has been held on it for a long time... But the split must remain possible. Well, you never know.”

“And for your elevator districts? Imagine if the third floor would secede !”

“Not very convenient, indeed. When certain really impracticable splits lead to blocked situations, it is possible to make an appeal in defense of the common good or in violation of the fundamentals before an arbitration board. But this is a procedure that is rarely successful. A demerger that is adopted by a majority and repeated the following year normally has good reason to be... Some important demerger requests have also been prohibited to protect solidarity. Thus, a population that is significantly richer than the average would not be able to leave the basic insurance funds, nor the Great Common Fund. It would be too easy for the rich to escape their share of solidarity. But, apart from these few exceptions...”

“If I understand,” I interrupted, concerned not to lose track, “barring major technical problems or your obligation of solidarity, you have only freely chosen affiliations. Any geographical area can leave a district whenever it wants. Or even separate from your Arcania ?”

“Well fortunately ! We are not tyrants. But, as I told you, secession is rare, too rare... Certainly, our history has had a few sensational departures. But most of them were brief. Except for the Arbikhazians who, in 1873, decided to secede from almost all the global districts at the same time...”

Extec, families and multiple memberships

Clisthène, for the past few minutes, had been listening to us distractedly. She seemed to take some pleasure in seeing me surprised by everything I discovered. She intervened :

“You are so out of it !”

“I must say I’m having a little trouble,” I admitted.

“France has a very different culture,” sympathized Chung-Su Joseon by pulling on his thin mustache.

“We can take an example that you know,” offered compassionate Clisthène. “The Brotherhood of the Lamb. It is both a district and an association, because in order to join it, you have to live in its territory. And to live there, you have to be a member. And you also have to suspend your other memberships before you can join...”

“This is a very special case,” intervened Joseon. “If I am not mistaken, can we say that it is a community with exclusive territory, an extec ?”

Clisthène replied in a suspicious tone :

“And so what ? I know extecs aren’t exactly a popular sight, but...”

“Forgive me,” politely interrupted Joseon, “far be it from me... By the way, I myself belonged to a small extec for a while.” He had a small smile on his face but, quickly taking his seriousness back, he added to my intention: “You understand, belonging to only one association, it can be oppressive and even generate *de facto* subordination, which can appear shocking. Usually, people belong to at least six or seven associations, to one or two communes and to quite a few districts. I’m not saying that they are right to disperse,” he added in the direction of Clisthène, “everyone lives as they wish...”

“People commit a lot to commit a little,” Clisthène replied, with a scornful little pout that I didn’t know her by.

“Indeed... but you’d agree that the membership numbers are rising fast. So most people belong to at least two or three families and...”

“Two or three families ?” I interrupted, stunned.

“Two or three family associations, if you prefer,” said Joseon.

“I don’t understand how this can be possible !”

“The most common family association is between parents and children. This can already make you an association with your children and another one with your parents. Sometimes it is the same, but not necessarily. You also have to take into account cousins, separated parents, siblings from several beds. Not to mention the very many family associations without any biological family ties.”

“Okay, but they’re not associations !” I said. “You don’t choose your family ! You can neither join nor leave it !”

“Why not ! On what basis could a family be formed if not on a voluntary basis?”

“Well, nature, filiation... A child cannot cancel his parents !”

“As long as he’s too small to talk, of course not... In Arcania, the unconditional right to terminate a family membership is only granted from the age of seven.”

“But it’s absurd !”

“I agree with you,” Joseon intervened. “The oppression and abuse suffered in some families would, in my opinion, require that the choice of family affiliation be respected long before...”

It was definitely difficult to follow a discussion with the people of this country for very long without falling into delirium... I just shook my head a little. Chung-Su Joseon took it as an acquiescence and continued :

“So as I said, there are multiple affiliations. In addition to family associations, people most often belong to at least one professional association, to one or two ideal associations (trade union, religious or political), sometimes to one or two sports or leisure associations... Below three associative or community memberships, freedom is very much under threat. We sometimes recall the hell of the housewives who belonged only to one family association ! According to our ethnologists, this is still practiced today in some primitive tribes. In the West, there are also supposedly post-paternalistic totalitarian companies that organize not only the work of their members, but their leisure activities, their meals, their lodging, sometimes their love affairs... I admit I don’t really believe it. In short, you understand that with such repellents, real or imaginary, extec are causing some reactions of mistrust. This is undoubtedly also what makes them endearing,” he hastened to add to Clithène’ intention.

“Sure, taking such retrograde examples, it’s easy to discredit the extec ! At home, in the Brotherhood of the Lamb...”

“Of course, dear lady, you don’t have to justify yourself to me. I am just explaining all this to our friend so that he understands the reactions he may hear here and there. And so that he also understands why extec are limited by the fundamentals, as an exception to our beautiful principle of free organization. A extec must be smaller than a commune, which means that it must not exceed two hundred hectares or two hundred people. Beyond that, it is asked to organize diversity in membership or to split up, in order to limit the risks of exacerbated sentimental autarky. I believe that adults in extecs are, moreover, required to live outside the community for at least one month each year, in order to avoid overly harsh dependencies... Sort of compulsory holidays, if you like. All this to tell you, dear sir, that, in order to fully understand the functioning of our misarchy, you should rather place yourself in the most usual case, which is that of the multiplicity of memberships and affiliations.”

“But it must be terribly complicated,” I said. “Besides, I understood that if I joined the Brotherhood of the Lamb, I would be judged according to its own rules... And if I can join several associations and each one has its own rules...”

“Every association doesn’t have their own code, I assured you.”

“Sorry... I’m having trouble following you...”

“No doubt I’m going too fast. Do you know what a code is?”

“Yes, in France we love codes. But I had understood that each of your associations had its own code,” I said.

“No, no. It’s a pretty exceptional practice. The easiest way to explain it to you would be to start with the ground rules.”

“I am listening.”

Review of fundamental, optional and the supplemental

“For the whole Arcania,” continued Joseon, “there is a small body of about a hundred rules, quite stable, that we call ‘the fundamentals’. These are binding rules for everyone, on all the territories of our misarchy. To escape them, a territory would have to leave *all the* districts that make up the Arcanian misarchy... It would no longer be a split, but a secession.”

“And what are these fundamental rules ?”

Counting on his fingers, he started enumerating :

“There is the procedure of district change, communal comitia, the right to evict any leadership, the limitation of extecs, the freedom of membership or termination of associative membership, human rights, child swapping, the conviction for nodular offenses...”

“Respect for child swapping ? Conviction for nodular offenses? Excuse me, but I’m out.”

“I’m the one apologizing. I’m going too fast. Just remember that we have a first set of basic rules that are binding on all of us. These rules aren’t enough to cover everything, by any means. They are supplemented by a general code of about a thousand articles. It is sometimes condescendingly called the ‘Supplemental Code’. This code, too, is intended to apply to the whole of Arcania... But it is not entirely imperative.”

“That means ?”

“An individual who does not want to apply this general code can choose to adhere to another code, a special code. These are codes built by certain associations for their members. For example, the Brotherhood of the Lamb that you mentioned is an extec, and like most extec, it must have had its own code.”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been told,” I confirmed. “And all associations can build their own code?”

“No, only ideal associations, that is, those built around ideas. It can be a philosophical doctrine, a religion, political ideas that one wants to apply, the defense of a cause, a cultural identity that one claims to preserve or develop... In any case, building a code is a rather cumbersome operation. Most associations have neither the desire nor the strength to do so. For two thirds of them, the Arcanians are governed by the general code. Either because it suits them, or, quite simply and most often, because they have never taken the time to think about the rules they want to apply... Moreover, one can only adhere to one particular code, and only one.

“So there are only a few codes ?”

“It’s hard to know exactly... I’d say there can’t be more than a few hundred specific codes in all of Arcania. And yet, many of them are very partial. They just lay down a few dozen rules and for the rest they let the Supplementary Code apply.”

“And the rules of a particular code, it could be anything?”

“Yes... well, not quite. Like I said, the basics are always right.”

“Ah yes, I forgot... So most of your associations don't have a specific code. But they must create some rules ? Every human collective makes its rules... Even a family makes its rules. If only for the distribution of household chores...”

“Yes ! Once again you are absolutely right.”

“These are not codes ?”

“No, no, these are rules in addition to the Supplemental Code... You know, our supplemental code does not govern everything ! Well, thank God. It's a small base, but a very important one. There are rules that are in addition to the Supplemental Code, without contradicting or replacing it. They are mainly rules that come from associations, municipalities and districts.”

“Because districts also make their rules ?”

“Naturally. The introduction of parking bans, water distribution, an urban development plan or, conversely, the refusal of any urban development plan... These are things that only make sense for an entire territorial jurisdiction, in other words a district.”

“I understand...”

Their organization was a bit complex, with this obsession they seemed to have to always preserve the will of each other. But, at least, these people were organized, and they didn't lack rules. That was something. I remained lost in my thoughts for a few moments. It would take me some time to process all this. I warmly thanked Chung-Su Joseon, who assured me that the pleasure of making people discover is greater than the pleasure of discovery.

Child swapping and Educational Disruptions

Joseon resumed reading his diary. Clithène was again absorbed by the landscape. My absurd situation, a time distracted by conversation, came back to me. Wearing in a ridiculous dress, between a young woman and a sort of diplomat, I was driven towards the unknown in a bus full of children. Moreover, this majority of children among the travellers also seemed incongruous to me. At first I had thought it was a kind of school bus, but the hours were passing. And it was starting to take a long time for simple school-to-home trips. I asked Clithène about this. She answered nicely, but a little mechanically :

“It’s normal. We’re in the middle of a child swapping.”

“Uh but what is this ‘swapping’ ?”

“Eh well, they’re transfers of kids, kids whose parents are swapping.”

“Here parents are exchanging their children ?” I exclaimed a little loudly.

“Huh, yes... She said, embarrassed. “But, what do you want, in most of Arcania, it is still the parents who take care of their children. So, automatically, they are the ones who transfer them...”

As I looked even more flabbergasted, she added immediately :

“But I reassure you, I, too, think that community education is much better... and there are some in Arcania, too. The children who are lucky enough to be raised in community are then transferred by their community, obviously, not by their parents.”

“In France, are children usually raised by educational communities?” asked Joseon, interested.

“Not at all ! That’s not what I’m talking about. At home too, parents take care of their children... I’m glad. But they keep them ! They don’t give them away.”

“They keep them ?” worried Joseon. “Do you mean that your children stay in their family association?”

“Yes, of course !”

“Locked up ?” Clithène frightened.

“No, they’re not ‘locked up’. They go to school, they go for walks with their parents or their friends, when they’re older...”

“It’s not the point,” said Clithène, pissed. “Of course the kids go to school or go for a walk... It doesn’t have anything to do with a swap !”

“We just mean,” intervened Joseon, “that our children are regularly transferred to other associations, most often to other families, with other rules, other cultures, other lifestyles..., for a few weeks or a few months. You must have something like that ?”

“Huh... In principle, no ; children stay with their parents.”

“Even during early childhood ?” insisted Joseon.

“Especially in early childhood.”

“But it’s total formatting,” said Clithène outraged.

“Effectively,” mentioned Joseon to Clithène. “Their children must assimilate to their parents, copy them, adopt their ideological, religious points of view... A kind of educational cloning. It’s frightening.”

“Then, you too have received a clone education?” Clisthène asked me, worried.

“I lived at my parents’ house, if that’s what you mean,” I was getting annoyed. “Maybe until a little late, since I stayed there until I finished university at twenty-three...”

“You stopped your studies at twenty-three, so early... ?” intervened Joseon. “And you lived with your parents so late, more than ten years after you turned adult ?”

“I don’t see the problem at all,” I replied with a touch of anger.

“Excuse our reaction,” suddenly retreated Joseon. “We are so spoiled that we don’t even imagine that these things still exist. And your culture is much richer than ours in other ways. I’m thinking of your cheeses...”

“Your parents themselves may have forced you to go through such educational cloning,” Clisthène interrupted, really worried about me. “My poor darling.”

“Obviously,” nodded Joseon as if to himself. “Not having lived as a child in various associations, not having experienced anything else... People must consider that their family association is normal and that all others are abnormal... And over several generations... The violence of prejudice that must result from this...”

“I understand your disrespectful impulses better,” whispered me Clisthène. “But I’m sure you can handle them.”

“Similarly,” continues Joseon, “how to make a society with children who are not shown anything exists ?”

I was stunned. These people took their children away from their parents and put them in sanitized care. No wonder, under these conditions, they’re all a little disturbed. Nothing replaces the love of a mother and a father. But maybe they never experienced anything like that ? It was about not hurting them.

“So here,” I said carefully, “children... What becomes of them, thus deprived of their parents’ affection...?”

“Deprived... or preserved !” tossed Clisthène at me again, annoyed. “The oppression that parents can inflict on their children also exists, isn’t it?”

“For sure,” Joseon stepped in quickly, — turning to me, he added : — “But I also agree with you, dear sir. The mutual affection that develops so easily between parents and children is extremely valuable. And I am not the only one who thinks like that. In Arcania,” he explained to me, “children in general spend the great majority of their time with their parents. And that sounds very good to me.”

“Hmm well,” Clisthène muttered. “The bottom line is, you don’t get out of your home environment that easily... I know about it. An education in a diverse community is much better. But it’s rare. It’s a good thing we have the swaps... but I don’t think there’s enough of them.”

“Everything can be discussed,” nodded Joseon before turning to me again. “However, dear sir, I find it a bit difficult to understand how things work in your country... Without an exchange in childhood, how can you make your first choices of associations ? Randomly ?”

I stayed quiet. How could I make him understand that our cultural, national and religious identities are transmitted from generation to generation, are lived from birth and that no one really chooses them.

“Without transfers,” insisted Clisthène, “without leaving in other associations, what could you know about the others, the possibilities... How could you know the differences ?”

“It seems to me however,” Joseon intervened cautiously, “that it is not so much to reveal the differences that the swaps were created.”

“Oh really!” Clisthène said, “I wonder what else it could be good for.”

“If I may,” suggested Joseon, “I can tell you a little story.”

As we nodded our heads, he continued :

“It is said that long ago in a faraway country, lovers of wine sauce stopped going out with lovers of hot sauce, that wearers of loose-fitting clothes started avoiding wearers of tight-fitting clothes, that straight-haired people opposed with frizzy-haired people, who themselves opposed with curly-haired people, and that they stopped swapping children, then sharing tea, then talking to each other, and finally seeing each other. Then their imaginations started to run wild. Straight-haired people imagined curly-haired people had cloven feet ; hot sauce lovers thought wine sauce lovers had a pig heart ; and tight-fitting clothes lovers thought that loose-clothing hid scale-covered skins. Ignorance was followed by delirium, delirium was followed by fear, and then by hatred. And each one wanted to kill the other, before being killed by him. And never again could hell and slaughter stop. It is said that curly hair, then lovers of hot sauce, then wearers of loose-fitting clothes were successively exterminated. Then the survivors with frizzy hair, lovers of wine sauce and tight clothes, alone in the world, saw that, among them, some preferred soft and simple music, others rhythmic music, others still symphonic music. They decided to separate on this basis. After a few years, these groups stopped communicating...”

“And then ? I don’t understand what this has to do with what we were saying,” I said.

“Yet,” continued Joseon, “this legend has it that everyone, no matter what their clothes, sauces or hair, loved to watch the sunset. And that as children, none of them were able to resist the tickling...”

“Uh...”

“And the legend goes on to say that if they had shared tea, they would never have imagined cloven feet, pig hearts or scale-covered skins.”

“?”

“I simply mean,” concluded Joseon, “that it is not to know the differences that transfers are organized. But so that every child understands that there are not so many differences.”

We remained silent for a few moments. After a while, I conceded :

“We have a program in Europe called Erasmus, which sends a few students from each country to study in other countries, so that Europeans can get to know each other and perhaps stop waging war on each other.”

“You see,” said Joseon addressing Clisthène, “even in these barbaric countries they have begun to set up their very first swaps...” — then he turned to me and asked — “Could you tell us more ? At what age do these transfers occur ? What is the percentage of the European population benefiting from them?”

“For the age, let’s just say it’s usually between nineteen and twenty-four.”

“So late?”

“We prefer to wait until our children have reached a certain maturity. As for how many, I don’t know exactly. Less than 1 % of one age group anyway.”

“So few?”

“Well it’s for students only, which excludes those who don’t go to college. And, in any case, only the best students... and, among them, only those whose families can afford to give their children an expensive stay...”

“Obviously... under those conditions.”

Joseon had darkened. I must confess that, even without being very convinced by what he said, he had piqued my curiosity. I asked him if he would like to describe to me their child transfer system in more detail.

“Well at home,” he explained, “the first transfers take place as soon as we’re weaned. We’re convinced that small children adapt faster and better than older children. Up to the age of two, transfers are more a kind of arrangement between neighbors. Children move from one building to another, sometimes just from one floor to another. One person babysits the other’s children for a few days and then the other person returns the favour. It creates relationships between neighbors and free time for everyone. Sometimes there are old people who like it, who take a few kids, even if they don’t have any more children of exchangeable age. The duration of the exchanges is anyway short at these ages. The children come back to their parents at least every five days.”

“I can almost understand this kind of thing,” I said a little reassured, “sort of reciprocal day care. Why not ? What if we can’t find a nice neighbor ?”

“There are websites, arrangers of sorts, labelled parents,” says Joseon. “I think that a minimum of exchanges is mandatory, even for the little ones. But it’s very light at the beginning, a few afternoons here and there. However, from the age of two onwards, there is a minimum of one week per term.”

“But these children, so small., they must be torn apart between their different living locations...”

“Torn apart?” wondered Joseon. “But why should they be ? There is no conflict between the family of origin and the transfer family. These are not child transfers between divorced or separated parents, confused by old grudges. Usually, before the first exchange, the parents spend a day together to get the children used to it, sometimes a whole weekend. Children from different associations get to know each other. The parents also get to know each other... From the age of six, transfers take place at least one month per semester. From the age of nine onwards, there is a swap of two months in the year. And there are certain rules to ensure that swaps allow children to visit diverse community and cultural contexts that are far from those of their associations of origin. Linguistic, philosophical, religious, and socio-professional differences are favoured...”

“It must be difficult,” I noticed, “especially for younger children...”

“You are saying nonsense,” scolded Clisthène. “Children are more open than adults. And besides, it’s great for the sexual fulfillment of parents to be away from their kids for a while.”

Clisthène backed up her remark with a clear wink.

“You know,” continued Joseon, “there’s more violence from parents against their own children than against other people’s children. Suffering children see other people’s lives and they can compare. That can help them confide in their foster families, find protection. Thanks to transfers, abused children change family associations faster and more easily.”

“But what can you do if the parents refuse to let go of their children?”

“Only crazy people might want to say no,” Clisthène intervened.

“When the system was created,” Joseon calmly resumed, “there were a few recalcitrants. District educators would pick up the children themselves to organize the exchanges.

“They were snatching the children?”

“But fortunately !” gets annoyed Clisthène. “Can you imagine parents who want to keep their children’s education all to themselves? These children will never be able to make an informed choice about their association as teenagers. And do you realize how prejudiced they will be ?”

“Still,” I honestly said, “I don’t see myself sending my kids to poor people... or gypsies...”

“Ah, see, there’s your prejudice again. It’s obvious you’ve never really come out of your birth associations. But, if it makes you feel any better, I assure you that even with our swaps, it’s not always easy to get rid of the reflexes that parents instill in you.”

The tone she had used made me not want to over-emphasize... I had to be careful not to offend her.

“When we created the compulsory school,” I said, “the teachers would go and get the children of recalcitrant peasants, it’s true.”

“As of today,” replied Joseon, “as far as I know, it hardly ever happens anymore. The system is accepted. The parents have benefited from it and they know how much it opens up their heads. A bit for the same reason, I guess you don’t have too much trouble imposing minimum education anymore.”

I realized he was not entirely wrong. But I remembered the language exchanges I had taken part in as a child. They had not been extraordinary experiences.

“Relationships between kids from different siblings can also be difficult,” I noticed.

“That’s why, from the age of seven to eight, children organize their own swaps,” said Joseon. “It’s a great activity in schoolyards and on dedicated dating sites. We just check the proximity of ages and the diversity of backgrounds. If there is no agreement among the children, or if they ask for transfers to environments that are considered insufficiently heterogeneous, a draw is held. The names of families that are similar in terms of their level of wealth, their membership of associations, ideals, culture, main language, etc. are sorted out, and the exchanges are drawn at random, mixing as much as possible.”

“During a single childhood, there are at least three exchanges totally drawn,” Clisthène added. “Sure, it can be a complete flop. I was sent to the Geekys, who were always on their computers ; I always lost in the games they showed me. I finally gave up and spent the rest of the trip reading in my corner. It was painful... But it was also through a random exchange that I was placed in a Senegalese association. We sat in a circle to eat with our hands. Since then, whenever I can, I do it. It’s much more pleasant. And that’s where I met my best friend, the only one I flash regularly, even in my most ‘extec’ periods. After we met, we never left each other’s side. We did almost half of our swaps together.”

“When the exchange is a success,” said Joseon, “it is quite possible to organize several exchanges between the same families. This creates regularity and a kind of cousins from other cultures or other backgrounds. Moreover, many families organize exchanges or pooling between themselves over much longer periods than the minimum imposed. This is especially true since some of the districts lend larger apartments to accommodate these groups of children.”

“Nevertheless, it must be tedious to receive other people’s children, with their habits,” I objected.

“Entrusting one’s children means accepting to take in those of others. This reciprocity is a bit cumbersome, but it helps to reassure everyone. Everyone treats the children they receive well, a little also because they know that they will then entrust their own children to the family of the children they have taken in... That said, in general, we receive at least three times less often than we send. This can be explained by the fact that families who have no or no more children at home receive children without compensation. Some communities also organize some kind of summer camps. There are also those who take in more children than they have passed on. A successful childhood is a test of a dozen lifestyles. Did you know that my parents were Ludys, who spend

most of their free time playing board games, eating yogurt and drinking fruit juices. — He has a little smile that is half-mocking, half-nostalgic. It was through exchanges that I discovered the Geekys and the Darlyloves at a very young age. I lived many years with the former. But it is finally with the Darlyloves that I stayed the longest.”

“The Darlyloves ?” asked Clithène. “I’ve heard of them. I confess I’ve always been intrigued...”

“It’s a really delicious combination. These people are selfless, loving, gentle... It’s a joy to live among them, I assure you. The Darlyloves are big consumers of oxytocin. In addition to taking it at the end of each meal, we regularly took small doses, in nasal spray. As you may know, oxytocin is a molecule usually produced by the brain, especially in pregnant women. It promotes empathy and altruism. I have to say that it helps to achieve the ideal of a harmonious life. But, in the long run, all of this seemed to me to be, let’s say, a little syrupy, a little artificial. Hence my years with the Geekys. And you can see me on my way to Nehushtân in search of more authenticity.”

“I am looking for some fulfillment myself,” Clithène added. “Maybe I’ve been oscillating a little too much lately... I’ll see how things go in Nehushtân. If not, maybe I’ll go and relax at the Bonz’s. I have an old friend there.”

“The Bonz ?” I asked worried.

“I met the Bonz on a swap when I was eight years old. They’re always in their Tibetan monk’s habit, training at meditation ; it was really relaxing. And then, when I was little, they were the only ones who encouraged me to do all my Muslim prayers well. At that time I was very religious and I liked being pushed to follow the rite.”

“You, Muslim?”

I couldn’t help but jump.

“Yes, and so what ? Do you have something against Muslims ?” she asked me, stung to the core.

“Uh no,” I said hastily, “but your brotherhood was pretty catholic, I mean, with the cross, Christ...”

“Mahomet is the reincarnation of Christ, Sébastien,” struck me Clithène with a sententious tone. “You may not have known it, but you must have felt it already. Listen to your heart.”

In spite of myself, I made a disapproving face. I’m not against religions, but there are limits to mixing. Clithène perceives my retreat. Her gaze blazed for a moment. I saw her again on the refectory table, distributing punishments. I instantly retreated.

“I... I have to meditate on this,” I said.

“The most important thing is faith in our Lord God Almighty,” she added, “and just because I left the fraternity for your exotic ass doesn’t mean I lost faith !”

She pinched my buttocks, then hit her forehead three times on the metal table in the middle of our seating area. Her little trace of frontal callus, which I had already noticed at the brotherhood, came out all red.

Joseon, in a confused tone, told us that a few seats have become available at the front and that he had already been too indiscreet. He left politely and went to sit at the other end of the bus.

“We scared him off in the end,” I said regretfully, “you’re still weird...”

“What ? What is weird?”

“Uh...”

I didn’t dare tell her that her variable-geometry religiosity, between two outbreaks of overflowing sexuality, seemed a little unbalanced to me.

“So,” she insisted, “you find me weird ? Is it God or Muslims you hate?”

I'd kind of forgotten her religiosity. I let myself be deceived by her beauty, by her youth, by her sensuality. I apologized as softly as I could. I swore to her that I love all religions and also those that don't have one. She told me that she didn't believe me, that she could see that I was a dirty intolerant and that she was totally crazy to fall for a crazy person like me, xenophobic and tyrannical. I was deeply moved and started faltering. She told me I was a big despot, but added that maybe I was not fucked up, maybe she'd be able to make something of me. I took her hands, while she looked at me in the eyes — her eyes were so beautiful. She kissed me for a long time and told me I looked like a lost bird, as if to justify herself. But she demanded that I stop insulting everyone I met. I breathed deeply and almost painfully, and I promised her everything. She stroked my hair and came and hugged me. We stayed like this, without me moving, for long and wonderful minutes. Then, slowly, she moved away and she whispered :

“My family is of traditional Muslim faith. You know... And I had a falling out with them.”

I answered prudently :

“It is not important at all. I don't care. If you were still a Muslim, I'd be fine with it. That's fine. I'm a big believer in religion.”

“I just wanted to tell you that I've separated from my family, that's all. And that it's not very easy. But if you don't care...”

“No, no, that's not what I meant at all. On the contrary, I'm very sorry for you...”

“My parents, my brothers, my sisters, you know, they were very sweet, very gentle. Never any problems with the neighbors, or the children from the swaps, or the school, or the friends I brought home. And, yet, some of them must have seemed really original to them...”

“And then ?” I risked shyly.

“When I was 14, they wanted to marry me off to a boy I didn't know.”

“How awful !” I couldn't help but react. “Obviously, you refused.”

“You don't understand anything ! It's not that simple... I married the boy.”

“What? Were you loving him ?”

“Well, no, not really. He seemed nice... and my mom said that with time...”

“But you must have laws against forced marriage ?”

“Oh yes. Not only did I have the right to refuse, but all the rules and authorities of Arcania were on my side.”

“And then ? Why have you accepted ?”

“There are no laws that require parents to love their children. And if I hadn't gotten married...”

“But parents who choose husbands! Whose don't want their child to be happy... What kind of parents are they?”

“You can't understand. My parents were traditionalists. They were newcomers like you. They thought it was for my own good and for the good of the family. On Sundays, we'd get together with my siblings, my aunt, my cousins. We'd make pancakes... My mom makes the best pancakes I ever ate.”

Clisthène had tears in her eyes. This time, I was taking her hand.

“But, then what's happened ?”

“The first night after the wedding, I didn't dare... I was scared. I asked him for time.”

“And ?”

“And nothing. We fell asleep quietly. But the next morning, he tried again, he insisted. He scared me and I ran away. Afterwards, everyone thought he hit me. I came to say that he hadn't done anything like that... But I said I was too scared, that I didn't want to sleep with him anymore.”

When I think about it today... He was handsome and he wasn't nasty, it wouldn't have been so hard. But, at that time, I was very young. Anyway, the marriage broke up."

"You must have been relieved."

"You can't imagine the scandal. It was a disgrace to my family. My mother covered her head in ashes morning and night for a week. My father and brothers forbade me to see them. I couldn't talk to anyone in my family anymore... except my little sister Debra, whom I saw in secret, a couple of times."

"But I thought in Arcania you get to choose..."

"Oh for sure ! Joseon told you, the family associations, you can even leave them when you're seven. I've had all kinds of help to get by. I even think my parents were punished. My Senegalese friend's family took me in for a little while."

"..."

"You know, my parents didn't have swaps when they were kids... And for them... you have to understand them."

"But you told me you wanted to go to Nehushtân to see your family..."

"Yes. I go to them regularly. Always making sure they don't see me."

We remained silent. Their rules didn't seem to have upset human nature. Clithène looked away, but she didn't seem to mind too much that I'd plunged her into her memories. She even caressed my hand, distractedly. She had resumed her contemplation of the road. This one is now a kind of highway with four lanes, well, six, if you count the two bicycle paths located a little apart. The landscape was moving faster. It had lost some of its picturesque character. We crossed an industrial zone, followed a high-voltage line.

Most of the traffic consisted of trucks and buses without drivers. There are also small cars, very low, almost hidden by their imposing rear wheels, which zigzag around us. On board, nonchalant, passengers read the newspaper or played cards, without paying attention to the road. We were suddenly overtaken by a car that looked like something I know. With a twinge in my heart, I thought I recognized an Alpha Romeo – well, I thought. In any case, it had a perfectly normal driver. I was watching the road carefully. There might be others. I could see another one that I didn't know the brand, but it looked like it was from back home... In their capital city, they probably had an airport. If I wanted, I could take a ticket there to France or another normal country.

But I was in no hurry. Nothing prevented me from taking the time to better discover this strange country. In addition, Clithène was sublime. I thought I wanted to stay a little with her. I looked at her. Maybe she wouldn't remain enamored for long with a man as clumsy as I'd been so far. I'd got to try to fit in a little better, try to get along better on my own. At my age, I was the one who had to take care of her, not the opposite! Thoughtful but calmed down, she left the observation of the road to take an interest in the passengers at the front of the bus. I asked her softly :

"Clithène ?"

She slowly pulled herself out of her thoughts :

"Yes ?"

"Just a piece of information. Then I won't bother you anymore. My fund account, the one I opened before we left, you know how it works ? If we can transfer euros to it ? I have a credit card that..."

She shook her head :

“I don’t know. Who cares ?”

She kissed me distractedly, to reassure me or to shut me up. Then she went back to her thoughts. As soon as we arrived, I’d try to find a bank or one of their grocery stores. That Asian guy I met earlier, this Joseon, he should be able to help me. Clithène seemed far away, but she still held my hand. My big hand in her thin, childish hand. I focused on this disturbing and sweet idea as the miles passed by.

Clithène interrupted it. She leaned over to my ear and whispered :

“Look discreetly at the front, second row of the bus on the right...” I raised my eyebrows. She insisted : “Look... The guy, corridor side, who got on at the last stop.” I was getting up out of my seat to get a better look. “Discreetly, I told you!”, she whispered.

He was a young man with curly blond hair. I saw him from behind. His sleeveless shirt showed athletic shoulders. He was having a heated conversation with a neighbor. You could almost hear what they were saying. Suddenly he had a clear, frank laugh. Clithène smiled as she looked in his direction.

“I think he put a surfboard in the cargo hold!” she said.

“A what ?”

“A surfboard. There’s the sea in Nehushtân, you know... It’s probably a surfer !”

She joyfully kissed me on the cheek and continued :

“Phew ! I’m glad I left this brotherhood of impotents!”

She smiled at me, but her gaze went right through me and away. After a long moment, her eyes painfully focused on me again. She ruffled my hair, told me to stay there and wait for her, then she left towards the front of the bus. As soon as she got to the second row, a tiny jerk in a pseudo-turn sent her flying over the surfer.

Nehushtân

How I tried to have some normal activities, like sightseeing, stopping at a small hotel, shopping, going to the bank..., and what happened to those optimistic attempts.

At nightfall, our bus entered a huge round square, entirely covered with asphalt, with no exit. It is surrounded by herringbone parking spaces, traced with fluorescent paint. The bus, while turning in search of its place, made me feel like a ball rolling madly on the plate of a giant roulette wheel. With the suddenness of chance, we stop in one of these notches. “Terminus ! Nehushtân ! Please get out of the car,” dropped the recorded voice from the loudspeaker. Travelers got up in disorder, to grab the luggage placed high up.

Clisthène stayed at the front of the bus, surrounded by her new friends. She was so far away from me and so close to the exit. She could disappear like that, irretrievably, all of a sudden, without even a greeting. I had to get to her. I grabbed my stupid backpack, got tangled up in this ridiculous, heavy dress. I tried to get between the travelers to get closer to her. But these people seemed to be standing together, huddling together to repel the intruder. I could see Clisthène coming down, far ahead. I resigned myself and slowly followed the endless line of passengers.

The glow of the ending day mingled with the glow of the street lamps that gradually lit up. The smell of engines, petrol and hot tires was that of all the bus stations in the world. A few meters away, Clisthène was waiting for me. The little blond boy was right next to her, in his screaming, almost fluorescent T-shirt. He had put his naked arm on Clisthène’s shoulders, who didn’t seem to mind. With the other hand, he was holding a surfboard decorated with a pink and purple flame. I was heading straight towards Clisthène. As I approached her, she freed herself from the arm that was hugging her. I could hardly breathe any better.

“Ah ! There you are finally !” She told me, “it has taken you a long time to get down. Well, I’m off with Brian.” — she pointed to her surfer who waved to me. — “But I’ll see you soon, OK ?”

I piteously approved of the head. She pursued :

“No need to look like a beaten dog.” — she gave me a little kiss. — “Are you writing down my flash ?”

A whiff of anxiety caught me :

“ Flash ?”

She took out of her pocket her kind of smartphone and said : “A flashphone. That’s a flash-phone... you remember ? The decacilor gave you a fridge. ” I said yes, yes, of course. I reached into my bag and pulled out my fridge. Totally distraught, I told her that I didn’t know how it worked and that my personal cell phone no longer had a charger. She told me that I’d find everything in Nehushtân. She took my ‘fridge’, put my finger on it to start it, tapped it quickly and gave it back to me. In front of my distraught face, she rummaged through her bag and handed me a pen. Then she dictated her phone number. I wrote it down on my hand in a hurry. I would have liked her to repeat it. I was not sure I heard correctly. She didn’t give me the time. She told me : “Give me a flashcall. That way, I’ll get your number too. ” She gave me a smack and, light, laughing, she disappeared with her surfer.

I stayed standing still.

A slight tap on my shoulder made me jump. A man wearing a top hat and wrapped in a large black cape lined in red looked at me. It took me a moment to recognize Joseon, the Asian with the thin mustache on the bus. With this cape now wrapped around his gray suit, he looked like some kind of magical civil servant, a Mandrake from the office.

Compassionate, he proposed :

“If I can be useful to you in some way.”

I had no desire to be with that guy. I wanted to be alone, quiet.

“Thanks, thank you,” I answered, “but I’m busy and...”

“Of course, of course. Excuse me.”

I saw him hesitating. I pretended to be in a hurry, to have to leave. He seemed to feel sorry for me. He brought up a piece of paper with something he’d scrawled on it. He handed it to me and told me that it was a very good little hotel, very close by, and that it would always be more pleasant than the large complexes in the center. He assured me that the staff was competent and very understanding and that I could be accommodated and fed there without any problem, just long enough to acclimatize myself. He still hesitated a little, added a number and told me: “I also gave you my personal number. If you have any problems, don’t hesitate.” I slipped his piece of paper into my bag without looking at it. He wished me an excellent stay and we greeted each other.

I left with a quick step in the direction taken by Clithène and her surfer. She took one of the wide paths paved with smooth stones that lead away from the big asphalt circle and the coaches arranged in cob. Weak public lights were leaving the surrounding vegetation in darkness. Many travelers walked on this path, in both directions. Several pushed devils heavily loaded with various packages, suitcases or boxes. Large Hindus were carrying impressive bundles of linen on their heads. A few electric vehicles, covered with luggage, slid along a small parallel tarred road, in the middle of an uninterrupted stream of cyclists. I looked far ahead. Clithène couldn’t be far... I accelerated and realized I was chasing her. It didn’t make any sense. If she thought I was hanging on like a leech, it’d be worse. I slowed down, being pushed, being overtaken. Anyway, the path had already been subdivided several times. I didn’t even know if I was still in her tracks.

I let myself be carried away by the stream of passers-by to the edge of a canal where many boats of all sizes and styles seemed to be waiting for passengers and loads. Moving forward seemed to involve getting into one of these boats. But I preferred, with a small portion of the arrivals, to go along the dock a little towards a slightly fluorescent Plexiglas bridge. When I got to the top of it, I looked up. A farandola of small motorboats were plowing the water in the canal in all directions. Building fronts in faded colors were reflected in the undulating light. On the other side of the bridge, small buildings shone and blinked, flashing, aggressive. I instinctively moved towards them.

A flashphone, a city, and a 'Cheap'.

I arrived on a platform where all kinds of shops were piled up. They were shouting out prices in all languages. I wandered around at random, my eyes drawn to the signs, like a butterfly to the light. I was looking for a merchant of 'flashphones'. I dared to speak cautiously to a young man in jogging clothes, busy stretching at the entrance of a sporting goods store. He pointed me in a direction a few blocks away.

A sort of Christmas garland framed the entrance to the shop. In beautiful wooden windows glittered what I immediately recognized as flashphones. Inside, a salesman accosted me with a smile on his face. He was young, dynamic, pleasant. I showed him my mobile phone, which no longer had a charger. And I explained to him that I urgently needed to find one. He scanned my device with a little frowning pout : "Everything is possible, everything is possible..." he told me. "If you allow me a moment." He took out his flashphone. It's thinner, curved and slightly larger than my cell phone. He placed it in front of his face, about a foot away. The face of a shaggy, jovial woman appeared on the screen. My salesman asked her if she had a charger for it. He showed my cell phone from every angle. She seemed to find the request serious, interesting. She disappeared for a few moments and came back with the wanted object. My salesman turned to me and assured me that in a quarter of an hour, his contact could send him my charger, but he wondered if it was worth it. "Arcania has a good network," he explained, "but foreign phones don't access it very easily. With these old gizmos for encrypting, flashing and accessing biometric functions, it's a bit of a hassle." I told him I wanted to be able to flash, but I was not really sure what that meant. He explained to me that in old English, the word was 'videoconferencing'. He assured me that it was very easy. But with a phone like mine, the encrypted video is difficult to play, that it would lag a bit, that the microphone was not directional and that I should at least add an earpiece. Even the free model was much faster. Then I remembered the device that the grocer had given me. I showed him my 'fridge'.

"You have one, obviously..." He told me. "But right now, frankly, I'm not advising you to keep it. The video is almost pixelated and the aesthetics..."

I asked him what he was proposing.

The ergonomics of its flashphones weren't quite the same as those of normal smartphones, but it was not much different either. The salesman picked up one of his devices. He told me that with such a flashphone I could 'videocast', serve and 'geek' as much as I wanted. "Ideal to 'communitarize' or 'artoconf'", he added. As my eyes bulged, he added that the device allowed you to surf the Net and was a good payment terminal. He waited for a few moments and then told me that it was also used for phoning. I was reassured.

"And to flash ?" I asked him.

He explained to me that you have to hold the camera in front of you, to see the image and to be filmed correctly. It seemed simple and safer. I imagined Clithène appearing blurred, shaky, on my mobile phone or, worse, pixelated on my fridge. I was needing the right equipment. In memory of Clithène' flash, I asked him if he had a black one with a purple line. He told me that

he must have been able to find this model. But before he went to his drawers to look for it, I was having second thoughts. If Clithène would see that I have the same flashlight as her, I'd look like an idiot. I finally opted for a sober, distinguished, brushed aluminum model. "Do you want me to customize it?", my salesman asked me. I accepted without really knowing what it was about. He got my fridge, took out a small round chip and slipped it into my new flashphone. Then he handed me my new device, whose screen asked me if I was agreeing to pay three hundred and twenty-seven winkies. I put my index finger on the location of 'yes'. The little beep reassured me : it worked. I asked him if I needed to take a subscription, but it was his turn not to understand. I told him: "A phone subscription, to connect to the network?" He answered that it was working, that it was fine, nothing to add. After a few explanations, I understood that the network here is generalized and free. I thanked him with the troubled impression that I was digging a little deeper into their vast control system. But here I was ready!

I left the shop and immediately, looking at the numbers on my hand, I dialed Clithène' number. She appeared on my screen, disheveled, beautiful, happy. She told me : "So you made it ! Well done ! You see, bunny, it's easy to flash. Don't make that face. Now I have your number. I'll see you tomorrow or the next day ?" I agreed with a nod, my throat too knotted to speak. Her image sent me a little kiss and she disappeared from the screen.

I felt relieved and empty. I didn't know what to do or where to go. I wandered along the canal in search of a goal. When an idea came to me: the sea. Clithène had told me that somewhere there was the sea. I was looking for someone to ask for directions. But it was a carnival here too. I tried to find a 'normal' person, without a cassock, a crest or lace... I met a group of about ten kids, dressed in big skin breeches with straps and blue shirts. They wore a large green and yellow scarf around their necks. Little scouts ! I watched them zigzagging among the passers-by, waddling around a bit, their eyes fixed on their guide's pennant. I finally approached a big smiling Rasta. I stammered a little and asked him about the direction of the sea.

He was watching me in my long dress with my green bag. As he asked me if I was okay, I thought I must look funny. I reassured him as best I could. He pointed in different directions and, articulating, he told me : "The sea is this way ; or that way." I dived right into one of the directions he gave me. He stopped me, telling me it was a little far, though. As I didn't quite understand, he asked me if I had a flashphone. I realized I still had it in my hand. He reached out to take it from me, telling me he was going to show me on the map. I hesitated. This guy might steal my brand-new flashphone. But he was so insistent, so tall, I couldn't resist him. In front of the home screen, he looked a little puzzled. "It's completely new ?" He asked me. Reluctantly, I said yes with my head and made a gesture to take it back. "Give me a second," he stopped me. He clicked, tapped, tapped, turned my flashphone and showed me the result.

He had put some shortcuts on my home page. He was showing me where the first one led. It was an electronic map, which could display all the transportation means. A little dot was showing where we were. The overhead subway lines were in yellow. He told me it was called 'the magneto', because it was a monorail in magnetic suspension. He explained to me the different neighborhoods and the things to visit absolutely. I didn't listen to him, I wanted my flashlight back now. He gave it back to me by advising me to use line 7 of the magneto. The sea was only eight or nine stations away. I turned from my screen and looked in all directions for something that could be the magneto. The tall rasta pointed to the station nearby. It was so high that I hadn't noticed it. This magneto looked a little high to me. I showed him the many blue lines on the map and asked him if they were bus lines. He told me that they were canals, which were many

in Nehushtân. I thanked him and said goodbye, determined to stop this conversation. Without insisting, he left me by greeting me with a “Let Nehushtân be you !” Another nutcase, I thought.

To reach the magneto station, the panoramic elevator went up about fifteen floors, well above most of the surrounding buildings. I was in the middle of the sky. The city was at my feet, overhung by a few steel rods to which hang a multitude of small, twirling light capsules. In the distance, I could see the sea, unchanging, shimmering under the moonlight. It was beautiful, similar to what it is in France, from the heights of Marseille, for example. I welcomed its vision like an old friend.

I could make out a few boats, but I was too far away to see if there were any swimmers or surfers. By the way, I was an idiot : surfing at night would be a bit weird. Clisthène must have been somewhere in town.

A magneto came to stop at my feet. It was a train of capsules suspended from a high rail. Each one held only about 15 people. They came in different colors, with different names and numbers. It looked more complicated than I had imagined. I didn't know what to do anymore. The pods opened, people entered, the pods closed and slid further out, in a breeze. To my surprise, ten meters away from the station, the 'train' capsules separated and went in at least three or four different directions, like lines of light.

Undecided, I let myself get caught up in the aerial view. To my left, the network of streets and canals looked like a large spider's web converging towards the sea. On the right, large, straight, perpendicular avenues were separating huge islands of buildings and houses nested within each other, barely crossed by narrow streets. For the most part, these buildings were entirely covered with giant, colorful, shrill frescoes. I saw large tags, a dragon that snaked and circled several buildings ; a kid's head, manga style, with huge eyes in the middle of which opened windows. As if to compensate for this extreme and shrill density, every two or three blocks, more or less randomly, a large square bordered by avenues had been left empty of any construction, as if forgotten by the urban plan. These dark areas surmounted by tall trees were prey to a nature that, from afar, seemed wild.

There was a strange atmosphere in this complex, as if it had not been a real city. It took me some time to understand the source of this sensation : the noise ; that's it, there was almost no noise. I looked at my feet : our bus stop was a limit beyond which there were no cars or buses. The lights that ran in the streets are those of bicycles and some small electric vehicles. In the middle of the main streets, a long garden, a little disordered, replaces what at home would have been reserved for motor vehicles.

A new magneto train was coming in. I imagined the numbers on the capsules must correspond to itineraries, and the names to destinations. Several of the pods bore the number 7, which the Rasta had indicated to me. But I was worried about the way these oval bubbles slid down, hooked onto the rail, and then separated in all directions. I let them go. Besides, Clisthène, as I knew her, had probably already moved on with her surfer. I didn't dare imagine it... My bowels were in a knot. I needed to calm down. She needed a little time with people her own age, it was normal. She was just a kid. Maybe she just went out for a drink at a bar with her new friends. Either way, I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Clisthène would flash me tomorrow. She had told me. I shouldn't try to reach her. I had to wait until she did. Maybe in the morning.

I was still watching the city. I didn't know what to do. I heard a little rolling whistle, irregular, like a bird song. Maybe it was one of those original cell phone ringtones. But the singing resumed. I turned my head all over trying to locate the source. Suddenly I saw two chickadees, perched on

the fence surrounding the station. A little further on, I saw a kind of crow passing by, and there, on one of the station benches, a small blue bird with a yellow beak was hopping around. It was a little scary. Especially since I hadn't seen any pigeons.

I was waiting for a new train set, but I didn't like the soft sound of the doors opening. The glass elevator brought me back down to the floor.

My curiosity led me to one of these curious gardens located in the center of an avenue. Trees of various species grew there, but also weeds, dandelions and even a bramble. I took a closer look and discovered all sorts of crawling insects. I couldn't figure out whether the vegetation had been left to grow here naturally, at random, or whether it was all just a subtly messy English garden with an open-air terrarium. Perhaps a bird feeder, I thought. The street went down slightly. I thought it was going slowly towards the sea. Maybe later, tired of the bars and her noisy surfers, Clisthène would come for a walk by the water's edge. I let myself be carried away slowly along this strip of raw, mysterious, incongruous nature.

Between a small-scale replica of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul and a building in the shape of a giant Mickey Mouse disguised as a rapper, I spotted a classic, almost Haussmanian building. I headed there and leaned back to catch my breath. Further on, there were a few old brick buildings of the New York style – Little Italy or Greenwich Village. But these few soothing landmarks were only buoys lost in the architectural chaos. All this was a bit too much for me.

I found a bench and settled down. I was trying to see if the conversation we had with Clisthène had been recorded on my flashphone. That would have allowed me to see her face again. But I couldn't figure out much, let alone make her reappear. I've been going through the menus on the device at random. Suddenly I remembered what the salesman told me. This thing also allowed you to make phone calls. What if I had tried to reach my family back in France ? I dialed my number, preceded by the area code for France, in case. After a few moments, it rang. Oh, my God, it was ringing. What was I going to say ? And, by the way, what time was it in France ? I hung up immediately. They hadn't heard from me in days. They were probably worried. What if I sent a text ? That thing probably could do it. I was fiddling around... I'd figure it out eventually. But what to write ? Nothing made sense. I was not sure. Maybe it was best not to send anything. But I didn't dare leave them without news. I finally chose : "Hello ! I hope you are well. Everything is fine here. The weather has been very nice the last few days. I am enjoying the trip. Kisses to the whole family. Sébastien." I sent it. Well, I had done my duty. But this minute contact with the normal world made me feel even more brutally like I was in a nonsensical dream.

I walked randomly, paying no attention to anything or anyone. The night was dark. Then I remembered that Joseon had passed me a hotel address. I rummaged through my bag looking for his piece of paper. I showed it to a little old man who was passing by. He told me on the map the location of the hotel. He assured me it was nearby. He took a compassionate look and left me wishing me good luck. This ridiculous dress was really making me look like some kind of priest with a vow of poverty. I'd have to find clothes worthy of me as soon as possible.

The place that had been indicated to me was a small hotel, at the end of a paved alley, a little away from the main avenues. The lobby was simple and old-fashioned. Its carpet on the walls, short and brown, swore with the tiled floor, pale yellow, imitation marble. Leaning against the mahogany melamine reception desk, a middle-aged woman greeted me. Behind her, a poster proclaimed in big red letters : "GET OUT THE VIRTUAL WORLD ! LIVE *YOUR* LIFE." All around the text, photos, as if pinned, represented a young couple kissing, a scene of breakfast with a laughing family, a baby, a few hikers in a mountain landscape... The woman interrupted my

examination of the place. She asked me in a jaded, but professional tone, : “Cheap or Cosy ?” As I looked at her with round eyes, she said to me, annoyed : “We do both. If you have a problem with that, I can give you a uniform hotel address.” As I remained amazed, she calmed down and, while articulating slowly, she said : “Cheap, it’s two winkies ; Cosy, it’s seven winkies per night.” I still didn’t get what she was proposing. She nodded, thoughtful and said: “OK, I see, it will be a Cheap.” I just nodded for agreement.

“And your helmet, ‘til how much do I cap it ?

I was opening my eyes even wider. She explained slowly :

“For the virtual reality headset in the bedroom, how long do you want your connection to last ?”

I had heard about headsets that allow a certain immersion in three-dimensional images. But I hadn’t had a chance to try them out yet. She seemed to be offering me something like that.

“Two hours ?” insisted my acrimonious receptionist. “Ten hours ? It’s the same price, but you have to decide. Me, for all I care, anyway...”

She showed me the sign “GET OUT THE VIRTUAL WORLD...”, looked up to the sky and continued :

“And I’m warning you, I can’t exceed 18 hours a day for security reasons. And here you have to reload at the counter every day. If you don’t like it, check somewhere else !”

I’d had enough adventures in the last few days to fill my whole life. What I wanted now was peace. I explained to her that I didn’t know these helmets, that I was not interested and that I just wanted a room. She was surprised :

“Really ? Where the hell do you come from ? You don’t want me to block you for a couple of hours anyway, so you can get an ‘microtrip’ just in case? Or even just a movie projection ? It is included in the price of the room, you know ?”

I agreed to end this conversation.

She flashed my fingerprints on a screen and then took me to the second floor, to a small, well-kept room that smelled fresh. The furniture, simple and light wood, seemed to be from the 1950s. On the table were a pair of big leather gloves and a shiny black half-sphere, the size of a large watermelon, connected to the electric current.

Left alone, I cautiously approached what I guessed was the famous helmet. I brushed past it quickly, for fear of an electric shock. It seemed inert. I dared to take it in my hands. It was cold, metallic. My distorted image was reflected in it. I tried to lift it up. With a small click, it delicately detached itself from its base. The inside is quite large, with a fleece at the back and covered with a thick, convex glass plate at the front, with a free space to leave room for the bridge of the nose. If I had placed it on my head, it would have gone down in the middle of my cheeks and left my nostrils, mouth and chin exposed. Two small green lights shone at the bottom of the inner glass. I didn’t dare to imagine what kind of hypnosis or electroshock this instrument could be used for. I put it back on its base. I could have never slept next to that neural vacuum cleaner. I locked it in the closet, with all its accessories, and I felt better already.

I started going around the rest of the room, to make sure there was nothing else threatening in there. It included a minikitchen, with a sink and a small induction hotplate. Under the sink was a saucepan, a frying pan, some plates, glasses, bowls and kitchen utensils. Such objects have no place in a hotel room. But I didn’t care anymore. There was also a small bathroom, simple but functional, with a reassuringly ordinary feel. The tiles, made of slightly irregular white ceramic, rose up to the ceiling. It was interrupted by a curiously elegant gray and blue marble molding.

I looked at myself in the big mirror over the sink. What I saw crushed me. I find myself irretrievably old, flabby, grotesque, terrified. When I thought that Clisthène had seen me like this... I breathed slowly, several times, to recover... And I decided to pull myself together. First, taking a shower.

I soaped and scrubbed myself for a long time, as if to renovate myself thoroughly. Rinsed and wrapped in a bath towel, I risked myself again in front of the mirror. Without a comb, I ran my hand through my hair roughly. I was not much better. I tried a few wincing to restore my confidence. Tomorrow, I'd have to make up for it. Hopefully, Clisthène wouldn't flash me too soon and I'd have time to compose myself.

I crawled into bed. The sheets were thick, rough and cold. But the blanket was heavy and soon a soft warmth enveloped me. I closed my eyes, the image of my abbess was streaming from every corner of my brain. She was smiling, she was rocking me, surrounding me, and in the moment I fell asleep.

When I woke up, it was hard for me to realize where I was and what I was doing there. The window looked out onto a small courtyard, a little dirty, covered with a brightly colored scaled fresco depicting a few stylized palm trees and a herd of galloping giraffes. This aggressive morning vision confirmed my concerns : I was lost in a crazy city. I thought of going back to bed for a few moments, but I discovered that a letter had been slipped under my door during the night. Clisthène ? But how could she have found me ? I rushed to it. The envelope looked like something official : my name was printed on it and it had a sadly administrative logo on it. It couldn't be Clisthène. Maybe it was the hotel bill... I opened it. It was a summons to appear in court. I was requested to go to the court whose address was attached, in order to present my observations with regard to the facts of 'moral degradation and threats' that I was accused of. An appointment was fixed in fifteen days, but a telephone number was indicated to modify it according to my availability. A date for a possible trial was already set in two months, 'subject to deferral request'. I was given several addresses of 'lawyer houses', where I should be able to 'find help and assistance'.

I'd completely forgotten. When I had run away with Clisthène, I had abandoned the Brotherhood of the Lamb and thus renounced its protection. The police had come after me, and they'd already found me. How ? It didn't take long to figure it out. Am I so stupid ! It was so obvious. I had sent my fingerprints, even my iris, to the winds. Locating me must have been a breeze. I was screwed.

I sat on the bed. I was hungry, but I didn't dare go out. I replayed the events of yesterday. Clisthène had been with me for barely twenty-four hours. One day... She had left me for the first surfer that came along. Of course, she hadn't promised me anything. She said she'd get back to me today, or tomorrow..., or later, or, more likely, never. She must have been with that idiot jock. I could just imagine her passing her fingers along the muscles of a sculpted torso. I couldn't help but feel the folds in my sad belly. What the hell was I thinking ? It had been amazing enough that she had paid attention to me. Like a dream. I needed to come back to reality, get my act together. I needed to take stock.

Suddenly, I heard, in the bedroom, a few guitar tremolos. I looked around. It was my flashlight ringing. I rushed to it : it was a message telling me that all I have to do to download my court file is push a button. I hesitated a bit and pushed it. The horror poured out.

There was the interrogation of the two children. They were so perverted that they didn't even realize what they'd been through. Instead of thanking me for the efforts I had made for their good, they were accusing me harshly of having interrupted their debauchery. The testimony of this lecherous old woman, Mrs. Ehrig, was much more measured. She told of her fear, for herself and for her two lovers, and of her flight, but she insisted that my punishment be measured in the name of the state of shock in which I found myself, hungry, exhausted. After reading the vengeful words of the two children, I would have almost tended to feel a certain gratitude for the leniency of the old woman. Next came the testimony of my three accusers about their sexual practices. They were written in crude, perfectly foul language. But they confessed everything, so I thought it could probably help me. The letter from a 'share-assigner', which I imagined is some kind of prosecutor, completed the picture. He refused to give his first impressions before he had heard me, but he still talked about the 'aggression of which Mr. Debourg would have been responsible'. I was totally devastated.

Perhaps I should have alerted the French authorities. I took my flashphone back. Did it allow you to connect to the Net ? I'm messing with it and ... Yes ! Google ! I was saved ! I found the phone number of the French Foreign Ministry. They'd be able to get me out of here. I started dialing the number, but was brutally interrupted by a new guitar chord. Another message ! Of course... There was no possible secret on this machine. They had spotted my attempt to contact the ministry and sent me a warning. I opened my inbox again with a brave click of my finger. A powerful rush of adrenaline made my hair stand on my head : it was Clisthène ! I opened her message, shaking :

"Did you see?" she wrote, "Nehushtân, It's a blast! I hope you're enjoying it. Today, 'over-booked'. Tomorrow? I've already got a lot of stuff to tell you. Lots of kisses to my old loco!"

I stayed dazed. I read the message again and again. She didn't forget me ! And I gradually understood that she was right. This city was really amazing. I had to make the most of it. My court date wasn't for another couple of weeks. There was no need to panic. I'd got to get ready. What an adventurous life was mine! On the next day I had a date with Clisthène. I had to find some decent clothes and try to get some euros. I also had to see if I couldn't actually find 'help and assistance' at the address given in the invitation letter. You never know. It was going to be a busy day. I shouldn't have hung around

But first, I had to answer Clisthène. Something uplifting, something witty, something to amuse her, something in the right tone... Good. She had started straight away, no hello, no goodbye. I had to do the same. To look young and use smileys, to show that I cared. She had said, 'loco', I had to dare something like : 'My little flower', 'Cute abbess', 'My butterfly' ? I hesitated. She had been at the head of a religious congregation and she came from a very pious background. So, I shouldn't have overdone it, but stayed bucolic. Maybe a little hint of the divine... ? At the same time, I needed some stamina, some nerves. I wrote, I completed, I rewrote, I reread, I corrected. I decided to let go, to be fierce, and finally got : "I've been walking the streets. :) ! My God ! It's divine. See you my little butterfly."

It's dense, well-balanced. I was proud of myself and sent it. Tomorrow she'd meet another man, elegant, confident. I jumped in this grotesque dress, determined to put it on for the last time, and came down with a firm, conquering foot.

A schedule

Behind the counter, a young teenager was playing on the hotel's computer, probably a child of the house. I was waiting for someone to come. But I had too much energy to stay put. I approached and, to start the conversation, I asked him what he was playing. He turned his screen, covered with a long list of texts. "I am clicking a few votations to kill time," he told me. As I looked surprised, he explained to me that there was a list of current referendums there, that you can't answer everything, of course, but that he likes to click on a few. "You had to take advantage of the right to vote, hadn't you?" As I didn't answer anything, he resumed, turning the screen back to him :

"What may I do for you?"

"Nothing, nothing," I told him. "Do you know where I can find someone in charge? Should I ring?"

"I am on duty. At your service."

I thought of a joke, but he looked so serious that I didn't dare question his function. I asked him if I could keep the room for a while, at least a week. He checked something, told me there was no problem. The teenager made me confirm my reservation by sticking my fingertips in, with such professional nonchalance that I no longer doubted his function. This was another sign of the barbarism of this civilization : children are not only traded against their will or occasionally sexually abused, they are also exploited from a very young age. But I remembered my current trial and I was determined to stop intervening to protect anyone in this country.

I asked this receptionist where to eat. He told me that the hotel has a refectory, where they could serve me the soup of the day, if I wished. I nodded in agreement. He seemed helpful. I took the opportunity to ask him where to find clothes and also to give me the address where I was supposed to find help for my trial. He showed me all this on my flashphone. He took care to record every location he pointed out to me. He showed me that our location was a flashing dot on the map, but I already knew that. He recorded the reception number on my flashphone, in case of a problem. He asked me if I knew how to dial a phone number. I asked him, offended, if he was thinking I was an idiot or something. He apologized and seemed rather reassured. He took me to the dining hall.

Sitting at one of the five or six bistro tables, an old man was dipping large pieces of bread into a bowl of soup. Two pimply-faced, red-eyed, hallucinated post-adolescents ate face to face, without talking to each other and at full speed, as if they were racing to see who would finish his meal first. A little further on, a family of Africans in boubous, sitting on the floor on cushions and carpets, slowly shared with their hands a dish of meat in sauce and flour cakes. They were chatting happily in a language I didn't understand. I tried not to stare too much at those present and sat discreetly at one of the free tables. The kid reappeared with a large steaming bowl, a small plate of toasted tofu, a spoon, chopsticks and a well-stocked bread basket. He put it all down in front of me and, without asking my permission, sat down in front of me. I spotted some vegetables, potatoes and bits of a kind of rind in the broth, and this... which I took with my chopsticks to

inspect ; as I thought it was pig's tripe, or something similar. The kid was encouraging me. I didn't want to seem rude, so I swallowed it. It was a little spongy, but edible. I drank some broth, and swallowed a piece of bread to pass it on. I tried the tofu, which turned out to be slightly spicy and not bad at all. The kid looked at me with curiosity. I put a piece of bread in the soup, in the old man's way (it must have been the local custom), caught it with the spoon and swallowed it. The kid seemed to approve of my actions with his eyes. He asked : "So ?" I told him the soup was good. And, to my surprise, I meant it.

I was a little uncomfortable with the kid being here. But I kept eating. After a few moments, he asked me if I was a newcomer, where I came from and what it was like at home. I told him that I came from France, that it was a very beautiful country, very rich and very civilized, that I had arrived a few days ago in his country, but that it was my first night in Nehushtân. He asked me if I was going to stay here all my life. I told him that I didn't, no, certainly not. He told me that there were not many people leaving and that if I wanted to stay, all I had to do was go through a labor exchange, and there was one not far from here. He took my flashphone and added a location. I was liking that kid. I asked him :

"And is it okay in your country to work that young?"

"I am not that young, I am fourteen!"

"In my country, at that age you have to go to school."

"Oh yes ! Us too, unfortunately !"

He told me that until the age of twenty-five, you have to study at least twelve hours a week and only then do what you want. And, as soon as he would reach that age, he intended to study only a few hours a week for at least four or five years to rest. Then he'd see. I asked him if, in addition to his school obligations, his job was not too tiring. He told me that it was hard, that not all the clients were nice like me, and that two mornings of work a week is a lot. But he wanted to put some money aside for when he'd move into his apartment. I told him that, in my country, children don't work, that they live with their parents and that it's fine like that. He said that perhaps in my country, parents were leaving their children free to do what they wanted, but that here, unfortunately, it was not always easy. And he hoped to be financially independent as soon as possible. I asked him again how old he was. He kept telling me that he was fourteen years old and that he would not be able to work full time until he was fifteen. He was looking forward to that. I asked him if it didn't scare him away from working full-time. He answered me negatively, saying that he felt perfectly able of working 16 hours a week, just like any adult. I told him that he must be mistaken, that an actual full-time job is more like forty hours. In France, we do have the 'thirty-five hours', but we would never be able to get by without all the derogations that allow people to work more to earn more. He said that in Arcania too, there were people who worked more. But full-time was sixteen hours and to work more, you really need money, given what the overtime brought. According to him, overtime is overtaxed. He said that overtime cost more to the hotel than normal hours, but the net result was that you got barely a quarter of the pay for normal hours. I smiled at him. Clearly, this kid must not have known his country's rules very well. And since I didn't want to get into big debates so early in the morning, I finished my soup and politely left. I had a lot to do today.

Urban areas, from wilderness to selfixed

Getting out of the hotel and back into the city came as a shock. These flashy buildings with their incoherent styles made me nauseous. Luckily, there was this amazing, soothing silence. Little sparrows fluttered here and there, above the green line that separated the roadway. I couldn't help but look at an old man with multicolored hair, and then at a young woman with a bowler hat riding a velocipede straight out of a nineteenth-century picture book, with a very large front wheel and a very small rear wheel. Two ballerinas were kissing each other ostensibly, three feathered Indians sitting in suits passed each other a long pipe... The efforts made by all these eccentrics to attract attention seemed pitiful to me. But I admitted that, for the tourist, the show was distracting. Then I remembered my big white dress and my green backpack... Before condemning the natives too much, I had to stop making a spectacle of myself. And I intended to do so as soon as possible.

The clothing store the kid told me about did exist and it was very close to the hotel. But it was a huge thrift store. There were all kinds of herds, each one more eccentric and used than the next. No matter how much I rummaged through the heaps, really, there was nothing decent. I explained to a saleswoman that I was looking for new clothes. She stared at me and, with a smirk on her face, gave me an address.

I didn't have a lot of options other than taking her advice. Along the way, I came across several of these very many, obviously ancient canals that ran through the western part of the city. They would have given it a false air of Venice or Amsterdam, if a minimal urban plan had been respected. Watching these long waterways lined with old stones gave me a sense of architectural chaos. One eye on the canals, another on my flashphone, I walked with a good step. I tried to escape the exhausting color contrasts of the houses. I noticed, however, that the opposite bank of the canal was of a very different kind. It seemed to have been naturalized : a small path, at the water's edge, created a country atmosphere, among low plants, flowers and reeds. Beyond that, greenery, a few big trees, no big buildings. It must have been a kind of park..., curiously dotted with small plank huts. A little further on, I could make out the top of a circus tent. Some plots seemed to be cultivated. Perhaps it was simply a succession of working-class gardens ? The inhabitants walking along the water were quite colorful, but no more than those on my side. They looked calm. According to the plan of the flashphone, the recommended path passed right through this area. I took a bridge to reach this intriguing landscape.

On this side, to my relief, there were no more concrete suspensions, no more buildings made of metal bars, twisted in all directions, and no more aggressive colors. The only buildings around me were small, made of junk, like improved huts. They were quite spaced out and surrounded by wild nature, skillfully reconstructed. They looked like real wildflowers and wild grasses. The road that was crossing the area was roughly covered with stony alluvium. I took it, looking as discreetly as possible to the right and to the left, accelerating the pace so as not to look like a tourist. A frame of wooden pallets, covered with a big truck tarpaulin, formed a kind of tent. I thought I saw a sofa and some mattresses inside. I passed two vegetable gardens that reassured

me a little. A little further on, four misaligned cinder block pillars, topped with corrugated iron, formed a sort of veranda. Under this shelter, a father and four children were about to share a pot of mashed potatoes and chipolatas. The man turned to me and shouted : “Ahridiaaa !” As I was about to run for my life, a powerful woman’s voice exclaimed right behind me : “I’m coming !” I had just enough time to turn around to see an edgy little woman get out of a brand new aerodynamic RV with a satellite dish sticking out of it and head towards the mashed potatoes. I walked away in a hurry. A glance behind me confirmed that these people were just about to have lunch together. But I was not unhappy to walk away.

A little further on, a more elaborate brick and concrete house was under construction. I went around it and came across a camp that gathered about fifteen tents, set up in a circle around two large wooden caravans. The camp was crossed by half-naked children running around and half-gypsies, half-hippies, vaguely disguised as Apaches, who were doing various tasks. They seemed, fortunately, not to pay too much attention to me. Beyond the camp, a group of about ten workers were busy around two excavators and piles of pipes of various sizes. These workers, with their plastic helmets, fluorescent vests, big shoes and gloves, were wearing the usual uniform of construction workers. I walked up to the man who looked like the foreman and asked him what all this was all about. He scanned me up and down, gauged me and gave me a nasty look. Quickly, he gave me a ready-made speech that, obviously, he was frequently repeating :

“There are too many people per square foot, sir. What do you want us to do ? I don’t make the rules. We need to get your sewage, water and wiring in place. What do you want me to tell you ?! If you want real wildlife, just go to Zubriq or Orgon. There’s plenty more WOAR there.

“But...,” I tried to interrupt.

“There’s no space for ‘but’ ! And if you’re not happy, wait until the demolition work on the Strull buildings is completed. It’ll be a new WOAR, not too far from the center. You’re not going to die for two weeks in a hotel !”

“It isn’t that...” I tried.

“Eh fine, then stay. You know, between going to WOAR and finishing a district, it takes time. And, if you don’t want to use our drinking water and sewage, feel free! But we have to install it. Come on, move along now. We’ve got work to do.”

I moved away quickly, always following the rough road, more circumspect than ever. I arrived towards a kind of wooden hut, surmounted by a large western-style sign, which announced : ‘Café’. A sort of open-air terrace, with a badly weeded earthy ground, with a few tables and chairs, seemed to confirm the thing. The smile of the ageless and toothless owner incited me to sit down at one of the tables set up a bit wobbly. I didn’t dare refuse, so he asked me what I wanted.

“A... a Coke,” I said, remembering that at least they had those in this country.

“Can’t you read ?” asked the owner, showing me his sign.

“Uh,...” I said, “one... coffee ?”

“That’s better... So, Mexico ? Costa Rica ? Brazil ?”

“Brazil,” I said randomly.

“Very good choice,” he told me, relaxing a little.

I watched him walk away, limping, and immediately return carrying a large bowl of dark liquid.

“I am roasting it myself,” he proudly announced.

I thanked him politely and took this opportunity to tell him that I was a stranger, passing by, and that I..., that I had a hard time understanding what all this was all about.

“All what ?”

With a gesture, I show him around.

“All this, all around.”

“Oh that,” he told me, “is the end of a WOAR.”

“A WOAR ?”

“A ‘Wild Occupation ARea’. A place where everyone can build their cabin.”

“But this must be a wild rush !”

“Not really. Depends on the location. Besides, it usually attracts marginals, nomads, itinerants. To squat in this kind of jungle without the amenities, you know, it’s still a lifestyle...”

My God, as I understood it, it was some kind of shantytown growing in the middle of the city.

“But how is it possible ?” I whispered, unable to hide my disgust. “How can your authorities let it get this bad...”

“Our authorities ?”

“I don’t know what you call them, but don’t you have anyone to stop this kind of thing ?”

“Oh yes ! Between the communal claims, the claim-assignment to the Common Fund, the parks and gardens... Fortunately we have our quota of WOAR in the Nehushtân register. And yet... we can’t do it, sir. Look (he showed the workers a little further on), it’s only six months since the WOAR was opened and it’s already the end... All the fundamental rights districts are jumping on us.”

“What do you mean ?”

“Well just look. The drinking water district, the electricity district, the sewer district, the Internet wiring district... With this stupid ideology of access for all, they have to put their stuff everywhere. And what follows, let me tell you that I know it : some of them are already building permanent. The area was opened not six months ago and you’ll see that we’re going to be de-commissioned for densification. You’re going to tell me that in town, in Nehushtân, obviously... I hope we’ll be able to keep a bit of FC.

“Which means ?”

“Eh well, you really don’t belong here.”

“Uh no... Like I said, I’m sorry, but...”

“Don’t apologize. You’re not the only one. Many newcomers don’t have the hotel reflex; some even ignore the Cheaps. So one flashphone blast to spot the WOAR and they come straight here.”

Of course, I thought, these slums must be full of immigrants...

“Anyway, just counting the hut owners...” Continued the cafe owner, “except that when it’s too crowded, it’s over. Everything goes to FOAR or FC.

“ ‘FOAR’ ? ‘FC’ ?”

“These are some kind of district. FOAR stands for ‘Free Occupation ARea’. But let’s not kid ourselves. Concrete mixers are coming in fast and it’s becoming a city thing. So, I can tell you, freedom is over. A FOAR is a real district. We’ll have to get together a committee, draw lots for a provisional board of directors, elect the counter-directorate. And then, what do you want, everything will be possible. All those damn people’s assemblies can even vote on urban plans ! Here, I hope we can keep a FC, ‘Free Campsite’, if you prefer. It’s still reserved for precarious housing, like caravan tents or, at the very least, small tin shacks like mine. And completely flattened and cleaned in the spring. But then again, with all the sewerage, sanitary facilities, running water,

electricity..., even the FCs, it's not the same anymore. It pretends to be camping and it has all the modern conveniences. The real Zindians, I can tell you, they won't stay long."

"And you?"

"Bah, I might stay anyway. I'm getting old... I've got my kids pushing me to make regular coffee and get my teeth fixed. Ah well! if they could put me in a cage... I think I'll rather go to another WOAR, a little more stable, in the countryside... Or else, I'll fold and go to the first WOAR that opens in Nehushtân... There is the one that will be created when the demolition works of the old Kentara will be finished..."

"..."

"Don't you like your grind?"

"Sure, sure..."

I hastened to swallow half of this unsavory 'coffee' with its brackish taste. At my request to pay, the owner presented me with a slightly dirty flashphone displaying the sum of one and a half winkies. I put my fingers on it, telling myself that the 'Zindians' have their latest smartphones right here, and I quickly got back on my way. Given the hygiene around here, I'd probably caught a disease from drinking his stuff, but at least I'd managed not to stay too long. I was going to have to stop saying yes to anything and everything.

So as not to risk getting lost in this cesspool, I went straight back to where I'd come from. I was glad to return to the disorderly accumulation of the city. The architecture was still as dubious as ever, but at least the buildings were built, clean and finished. I took the time to study a little more precisely the plan on my flashphone. The shantytown was indicated by a light green coloration. I spotted a path that led to the clothing shop that had been indicated to me, avoiding this kind of inconvenience. It was located in the middle of a vaguely brown-tinted neighborhood.

This time I realized that colors had a meaning. I looked at the legend: this color was assigned to 'selfixed' districts. Which didn't help much as I had no idea what it meant. Perhaps it would have been better to turn back until I knew more. But I had to get out of this ridiculous outfit as soon as possible. The workers I met in the shantytown would surely have been of much more help to me if I had been dressed properly. I went on my way, following the plan.

I was stopping carefully at the edge of the brown zone. I observed carefully before crossing. Beyond the border, the buildings seemed old, very old even, but curiously clean and in good condition. They were made of large white stones, carefully cut into cubes, probably tuffeau. For the most part, these buildings had three or four floors, no more. Some, richer or older, had mullioned windows and a few carvings on the corners. But for the most part, they are very simple. The ground floors were occupied by small shops with discreet wooden signs, without any color or aggressive paint. The appearance was neat and clean. It was quite attractive, but I remembered the strict unity that reigned in the Brotherhood of the Lamb. I now knew that uniformity in this country could be a sectarian sign. It seemed prudent to me to ask a passer-by for some information before I ventured any further. I saw a group of bearded men in tutus and ballerinas approaching me, laughing loudly. I had almost forgotten the exhausting extravagance of the neighborhood where I had been wandering since the morning. I decided to cross directly to the brown district, without further hesitations.

After walking a few blocks, I was surprised by the irresistible sense of order and peace that reigned in this place. Even the inhabitants of the neighborhood were dressed more strictly and more banal. Little by little, I let myself be overwhelmed by a deep sense of relief. Later, I'd realize that Nehushtân consisted of many small, relatively uniform neighborhoods. They existed in

almost all styles. These neighborhoods 'selfixed' form small communities that took care of their specificity and harmony. My first impression of Nehushtân was that of a neighborhood called 'commons' or 'free', which here meant that they simply had no urban plan, no architectural discipline. These more 'creative' neighborhoods could attract young people or those looking for thrills. Regularly, works that were a little extreme were abandoned, razed to the ground and revegetalized, i.e. reopened to occupation. This could lead to the creation of ephemeral WOAR, like the one I had just come across, but also to the construction of new eccentricities. For my part, I must confess that my preference quickly went to the traditional neighborhoods, 'selfixed', with their preserved uniformity – which were fortunately quite numerous.

Sitting on a green public bench on the channel side, I felt reassured for the first time since the plane crash. I then noticed the total absence of billboards. In fact, I couldn't remember seeing any since my arrival in Nehushtân. I didn't understand how they could run their economy without billboards or advertising screens. But this emptiness was pleasant. The flashphone told me that I was very close to the clothing merchant which had been pointed out to me. I went there quietly, strolling around a bit, to enjoy this finally welcoming environment.

Sustainable consumerism

The shop was neat. Its window displayed some nice looking men's suits. The salesman had the dark skin and fine features of the people of India. His hair was gray and he was impeccable in his tweed jacket. He let me walk around the shop discreetly, showing with his restraint that he was at my disposal, but only if I wished. There were some very beautiful things there, chosen with taste. The labels, however, were not very legible. Some indicated two, three, sometimes even four or five prices, accompanied by numbers. As the salesman saw me puzzled, he intervened politely :

“The indicated prices correspond to the qualities we have in stock but, through an order, it is possible for us to obtain almost all the qualities for the main articles presented.”

“The qualities ?”

“Yes. The degree of wear and tear. However, as you may have noticed, here we don't sell anything below five. If you would like higher wear rates, I can point you to other stores that are very well stocked.”

What the hell did he think I was ? This dress definitely did me wrong. I specified:

“Please note, sir, I'm looking for new clothes!”

“Double zero ?”

“Yes, if that's what you call new clothes.”

“Sure, sir. New clothes. The first of the prices you see will apply. You... We also have zero if you like : clothes that have only been worn four or five times, either borrowed or rented.”

“But,” I replied in amazement, “I am telling you I'm looking for new clothes. I've never bought clothes which were previously worn.”

“Of course, of course.” He seemed impressed. “Excuse my reaction, dear sir,” he said, “but it's so rare these days. That said, you're quite right. We always find our way around. Our clothes are made to last at least 30 years. By buying double zero, you can easily pass on to your children...”

“You know,” I said, “it's not my first suit. I know exactly what's going to happen. I can never keep a jacket for more than two or three years, even if it's good quality, as I imagine yours are.”

“You're so much right, dear sir. This allows you to resell in almost mint condition with a minimal discount. And in the meantime, a perfect outfit, as if from the workshop. What elegance ! What style !”

“Yes, well, what I meant was that after two or three years at most, a regularly worn suit is necessarily deformed, worn out at the collar and sleeves... It becomes really unattractive.”

“Sir, are you talking about disposable clothes? We don't sell this kind of product. If you would like to buy them, I can point you to some shops for young provocks in the center, which sell imported products... But, if I may ask, for a man of your age, dear sir, what would you look like in disposable clothes ?”

“Because the clothes you're selling really do last longer ?” I asked in disbelief.

“Sir,” he said, taking a slight offense, “we only sell 'generational' here. The label is on all our products ! These are clothes that are made to go through generations, without losing any of

their shape or elegance. Under normal conditions of use, it really takes a professional look to distinguish a ten year old garment from a zero.”

“It’s really hard to believe,” I replied. “These days, isn’t it, even furniture only lasts a few years. Ikea furniture wears out in three or four years...”

“Disposable furniture !” My salesman looked genuinely flabbergasted. “I know that there are disposable clothes and I’ve even heard of clothes that can be found in less than a year. But I didn’t know that there is such a thing as disposable furniture! How far will this provocks go? They don’t know what to do anymore to shock honest people. This waste of raw materials, work, energy...”

“The problem,” I said, “is I don’t know how long this garment will last me. But I doubt I will still be using it in ten or twenty years.”

“If you’re a fan of fashion and constant change, so I suggest you go with a five. Six months later, it’s still a size five and the price difference will be almost zero. In the big clothing exchanges, some elegant women change their entire wardrobe every month. On the other hand, if you’re looking for short or medium term, I would advise against double zero. In a few months, you will have one, which represents a significant discount.”

He looked at me strangely and then, in a very slightly condescending tone, he added :

“If you just want cheap clothes, take an eight or a nine. These are still very good qualities, which can remain in good condition for at least ten years. We don’t sell them here, but I can inform you, if you wish.”

I shook my head a little and frowned, concentrating on the exposed clothes, to close the discussion. His speech reminded me of something. When I had arrived at the community of the Lamb, my clothes had been immediately discarded. And Hushāi had disdainfully said that they were ‘disposable’ clothes. Perhaps in this country, the habit was to produce only very high quality goods. This would have explained the somewhat outrageous development of the second-hand market. I looked at the labels again. I didn’t know the course of the winkie, but I was starting to worry about what these numbers might mean in euros... That being said, these suits were quite classic. I might even have considered wearing them once I’d have been back in civilization. By any chance and as a precaution, I asked him if he accepted payment in euros. He told me that foreign currencies could not be used directly, but he pointed out on my flashphone a cash desk branch that allowed you to make all transfers from foreign banks.

Reassured, I decided to indulge myself and not to skimp. The idea of wearing clothes that may have already been used by someone else disgusted me a bit. So I stayed with ‘double zero’. Anyway, in this lost country, far from everything, it couldn’t be more expensive than in Paris. I chose a magnificent suit in a very dark blue, almost black, very distinguished. The jacket had four golden buttons and a slightly sporty, slightly curved cut. The quality of the fabric was really exceptional. It cracked a bit. Superb ! A small golden border on the sleeves gave a discreet and elegant touch. My salesman offered me an electric blue tie, with a wink of his eye. But I remembered Clisthène’ taste for surfers. A little maritime touch would surely be appreciated. I preferred a beautiful tie that was a little trendy with chocolate-colored steamboats on a sand background. My salesman seemed a little disappointed, but he didn’t insist. I still chose beautiful white socks, a pair of leather shoes, which looked a bit like sailor’s Docksides, topped with little pretty leather tassels. I bought a white shirt to go with the tie and be smart, if the occasion arose, as well as two small polo shirts — a green one and a pink one : I didn’t want to be too stuffy. I wanted to keep my cool side. After thinking about it, I even asked him if they had jeans. The salesman looked at me disapprovingly. I thought he was right. But I was thinking maybe the suit might be a little

strict for Clithène. So I also took beige linen pants which, together with my suit jacket, would make a casual suit. Clithène wouldn't recognize me ! She was going to be dazzled. I took a long look in the mirror in my new clothes. Professor Debourg was back ! Nehushtân had to behave himself. The salesman applauded. He, too, was amazed by the class I'm leaving, dressed like this.

When I paid the bill by placing my finger on my flashphone, the beep was a little hoarse. The salesman, confused, explained to me that my account was slightly insufficient, but that if I left a polo shirt and the linen pants, it would barely pass. "Of course," I thought to myself, "it's not with the money offered by their kind of migrant grocer that I can get very far. It's already quite extraordinary that I was able to buy myself a flashphone and some clothes." I told the salesman to put these little extra purchases aside for me and that I'd come and get them tonight or tomorrow. The sound of the small payment terminal was clear the second time. I decided to put on my best clothes immediately. My small boat tie was going really well with the blue of my jacket. I stood up under the admiring gaze of the salesman.

He asked :

"Do you still have use of your linen dress?"

"Uh... no, no..."

I had no intention of putting that thing back.

"If you allow me, sir," he continued, "we are approved to take back any used clothes at the best price. May I ?"

He examined the dress carefully. He read its label but then he withdrew :

"Oh ! My apologies, this is a community outfit. You confirm it was entrusted to you ?"

"Yes, yes."

"In which case, of course, there's no question of buying it back. But if you wish, we can return it free of charge to your original association. Unless, of course, you wish to keep it."

I didn't quite understand what he meant, but I agreed with everything. I hope he'd get rid of that ridiculous outfit. If he wanted to send him back here, there or to the devil, I didn't care. In my new clothes, I felt restored to my dignity, to my status, to my rank. I was ready to conquer this strange city.

Mensualization and begging

When I left the shop, I was once again charmed by the order and peace that reigns in this neighborhood. The idea of going back to the turmoil surrounding the hotel did not delight me. Now that I was presentable, I preferred to go immediately to this place where ‘help and assistance’ should have been guaranteed to defend me in the absurd trial that was being held against me. A glance at my flashphone told me it was a bit far away. This could have been the opportunity to test their famous magneto. But it seemed decidedly unreliable to me. A little walk would do me good. I took a good, almost carefree walk.

At the foot of one of these old trees with long twisted branches and ball-shaped leaves (a fumski or fumis, if I remembered the name Hushai had given them), a fat man wrapped in a gray velvet coat was watching me under the rim of his soft, curled leather shepherd’s hat. Half of his face was hidden by this shapeless headgear, but the eye that emerged from it was staring directly at me, unobtrusively and harshly. I tried not to take notice of it, but as I passed within reach of the man, he pronounced, in one loud voice :

“A monthly, a little monthly for pity’s sake...”

I didn’t want to get mugged, so I was stretching it out.

“Hey ! Oh ! My Lord ! *Mon Seigneur!*” shouted the man as I passed him without looking at him. “You could at least refuse politely !”

The tone was firm, a little aggressive and I thought it was safer to stop and face him.

“What do you want from me ?” I asked abruptly, without being able to completely suppress the fear that this individual was inspiring in me.

“Well, okay, I exaggerated, too,” he said, taking off his hat. “I take off the ‘My Lord’ and ‘*Mon Seigneur*’. No offense, but it was meant to be in keeping with your nice clothes.”

“But,” I said, “why... ?”

“I take it back, I’m telling you. You can dress however you want.”

“But in the end, sir, what do you want from me?” I asked, encouraged by this individual’s humble and conciliatory tone.

“Well,” he replied, “as I was saying : a monthly, a little monthly winkle, please.”

I understood better, this man was asking me for alms. He was the first beggar I’d met. But they had them, like everywhere else. It was almost reassuring : this country wasn’t totally abnormal. I routinely rummaged through the pockets of my brand new clothes looking for a coin. Feeling them empty reminded me that cash was forbidden in this country. So I spread my hands apart to make him understand the difficulty. The man didn’t seem to understand my gesture at all. He resolutely pointed a small, flat, slightly thick flashphone in my direction.

“Be generous. At least take out your flashphone and think.”

I looked at my flashphone to discover, appalled, that on the screen was written : “Agreement to pay Mr. Léon Dauclot a winkle per month”, followed by ‘yes’ and ‘no’.

“If I put my index finger on the yes, I should pay you a winkle every month ?”

“Correct,” confirmed Dauclot. “Shall I put it on two ? Two little monthly winkies, for my kids ? To stay clean ?”

He quickly pressed his flashphone. This time, the amount requested on my screen was two winkies per month.

“Wait,” I remarked, “with this system, you must be able to accumulate quite a few winkies ?”

“Don’t believe this, my good sir. Sadly ! There are the stingy ones who cancel future payments as soon as they’ve gone a hundred meters away. And then there are the watchers, the ones who put ‘automatic cancel’ as soon as my meagre livelihood exceeds a ceiling they deem sufficient. But I’m not saying that against you. You’re not that kind of person, aren’t you ? Come on, you’re going to leave me a weekly winkle for the poor world ? Handsome guy like you. It’s your day of generosity. A little weekly ?”

My flashphone now proposed one winkle a week. What the hell was this hacking of my flashphone... I was shaking it a little, like I was trying to get rid of this virus. A beggar with a smartphone of this quality, anyway, it wasn’t credible. I took a step back.

“No, no !” I said. “No, not today, no...”

“Wait ! Wait !” He insisted. “Put on whatever you want. There you go. I’m not even looking.”

My flashphone proposed to me to write down the sum of my choice. I pressed the button ‘no’, I turned off my flashphone and I quickly put it in my pocket, as if it would risk burning me : “No, really not. Not today, thank you. Goodbye.”

The man sat down with a weary gesture. I was moving away sharply. A little further on, I turned around discreetly to see if he didn’t follow me. But no, he seemed not to pay attention to me anymore. He pointed his flashphone at a man in a raincoat and bowler hat. The latter took out his flashphone and carelessly put his fingers on it, before continuing his way, without answering the man’s obsequious thanks. I continued on my way, lost in my thoughts. I remembered that on my arrival, the grocer had provided me with a ‘fridge’ which looked a little like the device my aggressive beggar was holding out. With cash prohibition, it was probably necessary to offer technological access to money. I figured simple bank cards might have sufficed, especially for the poor. Finally, this unpleasant encounter should not have destabilized me. I should have taken advantage of this soothing neighborhood and of my regained dignity in terms of clothing.

A bakery caught my eye with its appetizing front. I went in, the door hit a small bell with a crystalline sound. A smell of warm bread, apple and cinnamon seized me. A saleswoman in a white apron asked me what I wanted. After some greedy hesitations, I pointed out to her a caramelized pastry vaguely resembling a strudel. She carefully wrapped it in white paper and presented me with a small screen. I tinkled my knuckles on it, trying to look like someone who is used to this kind of maneuver. A little hoarse noise went out. The saleswoman took a sorry look. She explained to me that my account must have reached its maximum deficit threshold. She was sure that an arrangement could be found with any Central Fund branch office. And that it must have been a misunderstanding. She apologized again. But she didn’t seem at all ready to hand over the little white package she had made for me. Horribly embarrassed, I went out apologizing.

But what had happened ? Could the pseudo-beggar have suddenly emptied my account ? Or was it that clothes salesman ? He told me it was ‘barely’ enough. Anyway, I was dry. I couldn’t stay like that ! The seller assured me that I could re-credit my account by transferring money in euros. What if it was only possible within a few days or a few weeks ? How was I going to eat ? Dressed like a prince, but homeless ? I could already imagine myself sleeping in the mud,

under a bush in the ugly wilderness. I rummaged through my flashphone to find the 'Central Fund branch office' marked by the clothes salesman. With anguish, I hurried in his direction.

Retail counter Credit

It was a kind of Chinese pagoda with blood-red walls and a curved roof covered with dark green, shiny tiles. I passed this curious building three times. Unfortunately there was no doubt : the number, the street, the flashphone..., everything indicated that it was there. But the only shop open seemed to be some kind of fish merchant. Not the shadow of a bank or anything that looked like a 'Central Fund branch office'. I was definitely in trouble.

Unless... I remembered the curious grocery store that opened my account. I just happened to walk in. I found a man sitting behind his stall, busy shucking big green fish with a wide, wide mouth, like a soft, flabby, translucent duck's beak. The smell of the tide was strong. I overcame my disgust and approached the man with a nod. He greeted me with respect, probably impressed by my beautiful clothes :

"Good morning, sir. What can I do for you ?"

"Good morning. I was told there was a branch of the Central Fund in this building. I just went around and thought you might know..."

"Absolutely, absolutely. There you go. What can I do for you then ?"

It was awful. This man seemed to claim to have banking functions. The idea of making a bank transfer in the middle of a pile of more or less filthy fish disgusted me. The man left his counter, took off his shucking apron and washed his hands thoroughly. Then he opened a door that led to a staircase going down to the basement. He invited me to follow him. I was taken aback. Maybe a vault of safes ?

It was even worse than I had imagined. The floor was simple dirt. A faint bulb vaguely illuminated rows of bottles and a few large, elongated barrels. One of them, standing upright, served as a table. It was surrounded by stools. It was indeed a cellar, a wine cellar. The old man told me to sit down. I obeyed while he served two small glasses of syrupy liquid. Then he sat down next to me. He raised his glass, looking me in the eye, and then he emptied it in one go. I kept my glass in my hand. In front of my hesitation, he informed me : "It's fumow. Do you know it ?" I confessed my ignorance. He told me it was made out of fumens leaves. It reminded me of something... I asked :

"Like the fumstea ?"

"Uh... no... fumstea is a kind of a brew. The fumow, it's distilled. It's... uh... different..."

He had a little sarcastic, scary laugh. I was having a backward motion. He immediately changed his mind :

"Excuse me... If you'd rather, I must have some iced tea somewhere. No problem."

I'd have rather not antagonized him.

"No, no. It's perfect, perfect..."

I took my drink and swallowed a good swig of it so I didn't look weak. At this point... It was strong, pungent, very strong. I tried to keep it down. The man seemed pensive. He puts his hand on my shoulder, waited until I'd recovered, then asked me in a calm and warm voice :

"Some troubles ?"

“No, no, it’s... it’s strong, but...”

“It isn’t what I wanted to talk to you about,” he told me, with a knowing look.

He looked me in the eye, protector. His familiarization totally caught me off guard. He pursued

:

“When they’re not here to buy me fish, they’re here to look for winkies... don’t worry, we’ll figure it out. How about work ?”

“Uh, yes... well, that’s not the point.”

“Too bad, because this is always easy to fix. So... ?”

“...”

“Would you prefer I take a look at your account ? It’s usually easier... don’t worry, I’m discreet. That’s why I’ve been given this job. Of course, you don’t have to accept, but it might help me understand.”

“...”

“So, you want me to take a look at your Fund account ?”

He handed me a flashphone and waved my fingerprints on it. I obeyed without thinking too much. He looked at it for a few moments and then, with a smile, he told me :

“Hundred fifty winkies of overdraft ?”

“Yes...”

He seemed surprised and reassured.

“Eh well ? What’s the problem ?”

“I am dry and...”

“Yes, well, no big deal.” He took a knowing look again. “Most of the time, when someone comes to see me, they have a more serious overdraft. I have to say, your authorization is very limited, really. Oh, yeah, I’m sorry. It’s a brand new account. In fact, you just arrived in Arcania ?”

“Uh, indeed, I just got here, and...”

“I understand... a newbie account. Welcome to Arcania, old boy.”

Another drink. He looked happy. We toasted. I got carried away and stupidly emptied my glass with him. I felt my head start to spin. He resumed :

“Still, you just spent three thousand winkies on not even twenty-four hours ! That was supposed to last you for at least three or four months. Of course, I don’t have access to what you bought, but I guess it was really necessary...”

“I thought you looked at my account.”

“Eh ! Oh ! I’m not a tracker, though.”

“A tracker ?”

“Ah yes, you just got here. Trackers are the only ones who have access to the money transfer logs. But not everyone can be elected a tracker. This isn’t about me. — He’s winking at me. — So I’m not gonna get access to your expenses, much less trace them back up the chain. You can answer me whatever you want, or you can tell me nothing. When I ask you what you spent all of a sudden, I’m just trying to figure it out.”

“I’ve just bought a flashphone and some clothes,” I told him.

“That’s all ?”

“Absolutely.”

“May I see your flashphone ?”

I showed it to him, and he mumbled for himself :

“A good flashphone, that makes sense. Must be three hundred, three hundred and fifty winkies...” Then he looked at my clothes with curiosity. I told him they were new clothes. He seemed impressed and rather surprised, but quickly recovered. He nodded his head and told me, understanding :

“It must be worth a small fortune... A new girl-friend maybe ?”

“Uh, yes, but...”

“Fantastic ! I don’t know what you do for a living, but with a few extra hours and a little overdraft, you’ll be fine. You’re just gonna have to stop being a big shot and tighten the screws. In a few months, you’ll be afloat. You haven’t had any derogations yet... I can very easily increase your temporary clearance. You just have to promise to ease up on consumerism. Which job did you take?”

“I... None... well, that’s not the point...”

“Oh really ? You haven’t chosen yet ?”

“It isn’t so much the point,” I tried. “I... I’d just like to make a wire transfer of euros in winkies...”

“Euros ? Hey hey !” — He’s winking at me. — “Oh, right, you just got here. A newcomer who still has accounts in his home country... for the transfer, that’s easy. Credit card, I imagine ?”

I pulled out my card, a Visa gold. He seemed to know what it was. He walked away and came back with a portable card reader, asking me for the amount. I was hesitating. I could stay for at least another two weeks before my trial date forced me to run away again... And then, it was better to have some leeway. I might need a plane ticket very quickly and I had no idea what the price was. I didn’t want to take any chances, so I asked for five thousand euros. To hell with my savings ! The man didn’t look surprised, and just asked me to enter my secret code on his machine.

I approached my hand, but I hesitated, I was changing my mind. Reality was coming back to me little by little, as if through a mist. I was at the bottom of a cellar between barrels and bottles, talking with a fishmonger or a wine merchant. And who sent me ? The clothes merchant who had siphoned off all my money in winkies... I was letting myself be led by the tip of my nose. How could they imagine for a second that I was so disoriented to the point of believing I was in some kind of bank ? If I entered my secret code, everything would be recorded. And, of course, not only would I have lost my five thousand euros, but all my French bank accounts could be emptied... Ah ! He looked really happy when he realized that I still had some accounts abroad. “A new sucker to rip-off !” He must have thought... I was certainly not the first.

The man saw my hesitation, my mistrust. He frowned and his face hardened. He didn’t look very solid, but he seemed sure of himself. He certainly hasn’t taken the risk of robbing me without strong acolytes on the lookout. If I refused to enter my code now, I probably wouldn’t be able to get out of this sinister cellar. I had to think of saving my own skin before I acted stupid... Resigned, I entered my secret code.

The old man gave me back the card with a smile. I asked if I could leave. He nodded and wished me an *excellent* stay. I felt him ready to leave with a big sardonic laugh. I received his irony like a punch. I tried to put on a good face and go out with dignity. But as soon as I stepped outside, I realized how catastrophic my situation was. I walked away as quickly as possible.

Authorities, I needed to find authorities. They had to have some authority in this country after all. I remembered that Réknis with the raving speech, but the nice uniform. He claimed to be a policeman or something like that. I had to find out what they had as a police force. Then I

remembered these people think of me as a delinquent... What could I do ? Asking Clithène for help? No, no, no... Surely not, I had to stay strong. Suddenly I felt completely alone and helpless. I sat on a bench, when I remembered the “Lawyer House” I had been referred to. At least the letter I had received this morning seemed official... And I’d probably never needed defending so much.

Rosin

Where I discovered stateless operational state functions and some unexpected public services. Where I learned what happened to the police, judges, prisons and school.

This punk girl could have been cute without her outrageous make-up, her shaggy tuft of red hair, her shaved temples, her earlobes turned into a display of curls and pins... And she was a kid, twenty-five at the most.

"Miss," I told her, "there's been a mistake. I was told to go to the sixteenth floor, to Master Erghuin's office."

"Oh yeah, with those resumes without first-names, you never know, isn't it? But don't worry. I'm Erghuin, *Mrs* Erghuin. So ? What's bringing you here ?"

"Excuse me, but there's got to be another Erghuin *master* at that lawyer center."

"I don't think so."

"Listen, I've just been going through the resume library available at the front desk. And, with all due respect, I've chosen to take someone with experience. The master Erghuin I've chosen is a lawyer with over ten years experience. And, no offense, but your very young age..."

"Sure." — Smiling, she's working on a piercing she's wearing in her nostril, maybe a tic. — "I started the job when I was 16 and..."

"Listen miss, I don't mean to be rude, but I wouldn't want to be taken for an idiot, either. Besides, your attire..."

"One second, if you don't mind," she interrupted me.

She was typing something really fast on her computer. Waited for a few moments while looking at the screen. Then announced me in an answering machine tone :

"Alright sir, it's all been arranged. Please return to the reception desk and a new offer of counseling will be made to you."

Before I had time to say anything, this insolent little girl rushed me to the door of her office. I had been confident when I arrived in this magnificent forty-story, all-glass skyscraper. A professional welcome, a magnificent collection of leather-bound *resumes*... Comfortably seated, I had taken the time to choose the one that seemed to suit me best: a specialist in criminal law, used to both defense and attack, capable of representing me both against my looter in the cellar and in the case of the old lecherous woman. And I met this punk girl who only missed a liter of beer and a big dog to go on the streets !

I came back to the front desk pretty annoyed. The secretary claimed that there was no mistake and that Master Erghuin wore quite a lot of earrings. She suggested that I look at the resumes again, but I asked to see photos. The secretary seemed surprised. This was the first time she had been asked to choose a lawyer by photo and the case was not planned. I insisted and after looking at her computer, nodded her head and gave me a reproving look. She insistently handed me the resume book and offered me a choice again. But she added in a very professional tone that in her opinion, the number forty-seven should have my approval : "It's the one of Master Rosin." That was it, to get information at a counter, you always had to insist.

Free services

From the moment I opened the door of office forty-seven, I was reassured. The man had gray hair, a suit with matching vest, casual style without a tie, but with a very nice shirt. He was peacefully seated behind a large desk made of wrought wood, covered with a slightly worn leather trimming. In a corner, a sofa and two armchairs, conducive to the development of subtle forensic strategies. On the wall, naval battle paintings and a magnificent photo of a fisherman's boss, reddened skin, shaggy beard, corner pipe, with a sturdy trawler in the background.

"Good morning dear sir," he greeted me with a cordial smile. "Let me introduce myself : Edgar Rosin."

In spite of his fresh complexion and impeccably curled little mustache, he has a striking family resemblance to the sailor in the photo. Maybe his grandfather ? Or a cousin ?

"Nice to meet you, master," I said. "My name is Sébastien Debourg, Professor of Law at the University of Cergy-Pontoise, France."

"I am flattered, professor. Thank you for coming to find me. It's often experts like you who give beginners like me a chance. I hope I won't disappoint you."

I liked the modesty of this lawyer right away.

"We are all beginners in a way, aren't we?" I said in the tone of complicity.

"In a way... What can I do for you ?"

"Two issues bring me in. The first is the most urgent. I've just been the victim of extortion. Lured into a basement by a con man, I was robbed of a very large sum in euros."

"How awful ! By Vulcan and Antisthène ! In the middle of Nehushtân... But how did that happen ?"

I told him about my adventure with my pseudo-wine merchant fisherman. He listened with attention and perplexity. As a good professional, he waited until I had finished my narration, interrupting me only to ask me for a precision, an address, a detail. While he listened to me, he was already typing on his computer, looking for information, unless he was writing the complaint. When I was finished, in a surprisingly shy voice, he asked :

"I'm sorry to ask you this, professor, but... have you checked your account balance after that unpleasant adventure ?"

I realized that I didn't. I looked at my flashphone. My account had been credited with five thousand two hundred winkies. I asked what the current rate of the winkle was in euros.

"Please wait, I'm watching," he said.

He was typing on his computer and then announced :

"One winkle is worth one euro and four cents."

It's correct and there haven't even been any exchange fees. I had got all my money back. Curiously, I was relieved. Especially since, if this wine merchant — fish merchant — banker was honest and had told me the truth, it meant that I just inadvertently had spent a fortune on my clothes and that the pseudo-beggar hadn't stolen anything from me — at least so far.

Master Rosin interrupted me in my thoughts:

“Dear sir, you can rest easy. I just checked. The Fund branch office you have contacted is listed and fully sworn.”

“So this wine cellar was a real bank ?” I asked. I was taken aback.

“I understand your hesitation,” Rosin reassured me. “Usually, our Fund agencies are run by booksellers, grocers or musicians. A fishmonger-cavist, it was atypical.”

“It is unimportant,” I interrupted him a little, to cut to the chase. “Let’s move on to our second case, if you don’t mind.”

“Naturally, please go ahead.”

“As soon as I arrived in your country, I was faced with a crazy situation. I tried to stop the sexual assault of two children by a lecherous old woman and I was sued for... But perhaps the simplest thing is for you to start by reading the file that was sent to me this morning on my flashphone.”

I handed him my flashphone and told him where the file was.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but before I can access your file, I need to be formally instituted in my mandate. A little digital flash, if I may...”

He handed me his flashphone. I was beginning to understand the dangers of that kind of gesture. I asked him, cautious :

“Excuse me, but... could you tell me what your fees are first?”

“What do you mean ?”

“I mean the amount of money I’ll need to pay for your services. A simple approximation is enough, of course. A rough estimate.”

“But, professor, what do you take me for ?” He’s just shut down. He seemed to think for a moment, and then, between anger and indignation, he pursued: “What is this ? Some kind of test ? A hazing ? Sir, if you’re a controller, let me tell you that this kind of procedure is undignified!”

I had made a mistake. They must demand that we blindly defer to them on the fee side. I might see the bill go through, but I didn’t have much choice.

“Please excuse me,” I said. “In my country it is sometimes possible to ask a lawyer how much his fees are.”

He frowned, doubtful. I should have avoided offending him further.

“Don’t worry,” I added, “in my country too, lawyers generally prefer their clients to rely on them, in complete confidence.”

“Dear sir,” he interrupted me puzzled, “perhaps we misunderstood. I thought you were proposing to supplement the remuneration paid to me by the lawyers’ house, a sort of hidden consideration.”

I was afraid I misunderstood. Hesitating, I tried :

“Do you mean... your paycheck isn’t at my charge ?”

“Why sir, you’re in a lawyers’ house!”

“And so I have nothing to pay ?”

“Fortunately!”

“Ah... Good, good. excuse me. In France, litigators pay their lawyers.”

It was Rosin’s turn to be surprised :

“It’s necessary to pay to be defended in court ?”

“Naturally” I nodded.

“But...” he protested, “and the poor, how can they do ?”

“For the poorest, there’s legal aid. But to benefit from it, you really have to be poor. And this aid is modest. Many lawyers refuse to work for so little.”

“But it’s terrible ! In your country, the poor are less defended than the rich ? We are well taught that the law in some countries is built to protect the strong from the weak... But I never imagined that this could go so far as to break the equality of defense before the judges.”

“I don’t say our system is perfect. But I don’t see how you can do it any differently.”

“We’re paid by the Lawyer House.”

“But these houses, where do they get their income ?”

“A funding district is responsible for paying the lawyer houses.”

“All right, but where does this fund get its revenues ?”

“From the global justice funding district, which receives a small percentage of the gains made in court, some money from litigants convicted of abusive or excessive litigation, a few other sources that I can never remember, and most importantly, of course, a share of the Great Common Fund.”

“So, as I understand it, you’re part of a free, tax-funded public service. I imagine, however, that some lawyers practice some sort of free fee. Those who can afford it don’t need to use your free ‘Lawyer House’ and can get a better ...”

“Well, sir, that would mean the richer people could afford better lawyers than the poor. That would be scandalous !”

This public service is therefore free and compulsory. All this must be appallingly centralized and bureaucratic.

“Can you tell me more about how your system works?” I asked curiously.

“Oh ! There’s nothing mysterious about it. It’s just like all the other free essential functions, like health, education... You just have to transpose.”

“You know, I’m a newbie and I don’t know how you do those other ‘essential functions’.”

“Of course, of course,” Rosin retracted. “My apologies. Let’s see, let’s take an unquestionably essential function ... Health, for example ?”

“Yes, why not ?”

“Every Arcanian pays insurance premiums to a global district : the Union of Healthcare Funding Districts. For reasons of solidarity, the amount of the insurance contributions is decided at the Union level for the whole of Arcania. Setting and collecting the contributions is almost the sole responsibility of the Union.”

“And then?”

“The distribution within funding districts is made on a flat-rate basis, based on the number, age and life expectancy of patients covered by the district.

“Life expectancy ?”

“Yes, and finally the allocation criteria are often re-discussed. The recent decision to take life expectancy into account was intended to take into account the fact that in some districts, living conditions are more difficult and therefore health costs are higher. There may also be an idea of catching up on inequalities... But there is no perfect criterion, isn’t it?”

“No doubt. And how do funding districts work ?”

“Each health care funding district organizes its health care system. The people of Nehushtân, for example, after much debate, decided to merge into a single health care funding district some 20 years ago, which has made it possible to centralize hospitals, achieve economies of scale and

purchase heavy equipment. But, personally, I live in the Pâquerettes district, where we refused to merge. This allowed us to keep a small general hospital and a maternity ward.”

“And it works ?”

“Not so well. Many inhabitants of the Pâquerettes go for treatment in the more reputable central hospitals, and the Pâquerettes district has to bear the cost. As a result, the Pâquerettes district finances the care of the Pâquerettes people, so that the district does not have much money left for its small hospital. Some people think it is time to organize a merger vote, to go with the others. I rather think that our funding district could continue to pay for care in the central hospitals and simply try to preserve our little maternity hospital.”

These splitting and merging districts reminded me of Joseon’s explanations on the bus.

“And these ‘districts’ you’re talking about, they aren’t ‘associations’, aren’t they ?” I asked him to check.

“Correct. Membership in a care district is not voluntary. It is mandatory. It is hard to see a resident resigning from a village police department when a municipal police officer is about to fine him or her for parking violations, or joining the health care district when he or she becomes ill and then resigning immediately afterwards. Solidarity functions, which ensure the effectiveness of a fundamental right, such as the right to education, communication, health or justice, are funded by districts. But these services are often provided by independent workers’ associations, at least when possible. This is the case in the areas of health, education, communication, legal defense, etc.”

“A Great Common Fund, funding districts, but independent associations that provide the service ?”

“Yes, just because a service is funded by a district and is free to users does not mean that the workers providing the service cannot be self-employed. I’m familiar with the system for lawyers, if you’re interested. Some colleagues work alone. They are their own law firm. There are also lawyers’ associations, more or less important. Here you are in one of the biggest of Nehushtân : we are almost two hundred collaborators. This allows us to work together, to help each other, to get to know each other better... In any case, for a beginner like me, it is difficult to start on your own, without clients. In terms of care, too, there are doctors who practice alone in their offices and associations, more or less large, called dispensaries or hospitals.”

“And how does the Fund pay the Lawyers’ houses?”

“What is paid by the lawyers’ fund is a kind of lump sum roughly calculated according to the activity. It is according to the number of acts, trials, regular or occasional clients, according to the relative importance of the cases...”

“You mean according to the amount of cases ?”

“Yes, the relative amount, if you prefer. The greater the financial stake in the case as a percentage of the client’s income or wealth, the more important the case is to the client and the greater the amount paid out of the fund. The most advantageous way to do this is to take care of the social benefits paid to the poorest : they are of such relative importance to these people that the premium is considerable. It pays significantly less to look after large companies. Their disputes usually represent only a very small percentage of their turnover, so the relative importance is smaller and so is the premium... But you have to defend everyone anyway, haven’t you ? And if the relative importance is lower, the client is less attentive. We can go a little faster.”

“Of course,” I said not without thinking that this country, which was paying more to lawyers who handle small cases, is really walking on air.

“Criteria for the distribution of the lawyers’ fund are set through collective bargaining between lawyers and judicial districts,” Rosin continued. “They are still a bit simplistic, naturally : it must be possible to process them electronically, without too much paperwork. Then, in order to better take into account the real efforts, the complexity of the cases or the collective work, the big firms like ours distribute the individual remunerations with other criteria, chosen by the elected representatives or drawn by lot. Each house has its own criteria. Our house...”

“I see, I see,” I interrupted him. “What about your other public services ? I mean : and for your other fundamental services ?”

“It depends. For education and health, I think the systems are quite similar to those for lawyers. There are tariffs by type of service and the services are provided by independent workers or grouped in schools or academies for education, in dispensaries or hospitals for health. But in some services, things are more centralized. This is the case for force services, such as the police. And also for network services that cannot organize competition, such as roads or communications.”

“But the cost of this system to the community must be prohibitive.”

“You’re right, this cost issue is crucial. There are always important debates on these issues. In fact, I’d be very interested to know what your lawyers cost. You see, many of us are asking for an increase. We have launched a protest vote. And some of my colleagues are considering a strike to influence the upcoming five-year budget allocation negotiations.”

“In France, from memory, the average income of a lawyer is about seventy-five thousand euros a year, so a little more in winkies.”

“Wow ! It’s a dream. In Arcania, the average lawyer’s income is almost three times lower. I had a feeling we were underpaid. Must be nice being a lawyer in France.

“Still don’t believe all our lawyers are well-paid,” I added. “Many are paid around a thousand euros a month, despite very heavy schedules. It’s the income of the big corporate lawyers that raises the average. Some of them can earn as much as one or two million euros a year.”

“You mean that for one hour of work, some can earn a hundred times more than others ?”

Speech on some numerical inequalities

Rosin seemed shocked. I confirmed to him that such discrepancies did exist.

“People paid a hundred times more than others ! For the same job ? This must cause terrible violence.”

“No, no, people are accepting it, I assure you. Lawyer’s fees over a million euros are still reserved for the biggest lawyers. It’s a pretty exceptional thing.”

“For us, in the same job, it would only take one person earning a hundred times more than another to trigger a scandal and a police investigation.”

“Uh... at home, too, it’s a little shocking. Even if our great lawyers earn less than famous sportsmen and women, whose salaries can exceed ten or fifteen million euros a year.”

“Impressive. Just out of curiosity, a full-time French worker, neither rich nor poor, earns about how much per year ?”

“The median salary, i.e. the salary of a person right in the middle, with as many people earning more than people earning less, is about twenty-one thousand euros per year.”

“So it would take more than five hundred years for the average worker to earn what one of your celebrities earns in a year? And if we take the poorest, I can’t imagine...”

“The minimum income in France, known as the RSA, is about six thousand euros per year for a single person.”

“From six thousand to ten million, let me compute... — he’s typing on his computer. — It would take over a thousand six hundred years.”

“Obviously, going to extremes... While you’re at it, just take the biggest dividends paid out to billionaires. You can add at least one zero : that’s hundreds of millions a year.”

“Tens of thousands of years of normal income?”

“And if you want to break records, just look at the fortunes, the legacies. We have a handful of extremely wealthy individuals with fortunes in excess of ten billion euros. Bernard Arnault has an estimated capital of more than seventy billion euros. If you have fun calculating how long it takes the average worker to earn that kind of money, of course...”

Rosin typed quickly on his computer and went on loudly :

“More than two million years ! By Antisthène ! This is seven times more than the age of *Homo sapiens* — our species ! But, how is it that such a thief is alive? I guess he is perpetually protected by an overarmed militia.”

“Not at all! He’s an admirable and admired man.”

My contact mumbled :

“I knew that outside of misarchies, there were violent inequalities, everyone knows that. But at this point ! When I think of that person who you tell me has accumulated two million years of median income. It’s as if he had stolen the income of twenty thousand people for a hundred years. Without even worrying... It’s unreal... impossible...”

He seemed to be thinking, then suddenly he hit himself on the forehead and launched laughing :

“Ah ! Ah ! I’m a fool ! You got me. No society can hold under such conditions !”

“But I swear to you all this exists ! It may not be perfect, but I do come from there ! You can watch. — I’m handing him my flashphone with the OECD website. — And it’s not one website, but ten, a hundred, a thousand of websites that can give you confirmation !”

I was scrolling through every stats site I knew. Little by little, he darkened.

“Well, well... But, still, it’s hard to believe.”

“It must be said that we’ve taken extreme deviations, it’s a caricature. To measure inequalities in daily life, we have to compare wider groups. For example, we can compare the average income of the poorest 10 % and the richest 10 %. I don’t know what these figures are in France anymore... But wait... Here, in France, the poorest 10 % earn about 7 times less than the richest 10 %. You see, nothing excessive. With a ratio of one to seven, France has an average level of inequality among OECD countries. The most egalitarian are Iceland, Finland, Denmark and the Czech Republic, which have ratios of about one to five. In the United States, the situation is much worse than in France : the poorest 10 % earn fifteen times less than the richest 10 % ! And in Mexico, it’s twenty-eight times less !”

“The poorest 10 % earn twenty-eight times less than the richest 10 %,” Rosin repeated for himself ; “one shoe for some, fourteen pairs for others... I imagine it’s a country in constant civil war.”

“Effectively, in Mexico...”

“And in the United States ?”

“It’s a lot quieter than Mexico ! Admittedly, the number of people they put in prison is a record and their homicide rate is three times higher than in France... But a minimum level of inequality is desirable in any case, what do you think of that ?”

“Of course. Our ten richest people must have an income of almost forty or fifty times our median wage. They’re stars. Singers, actors, writers, famous athletes... And for our richest 10 %... Let me check... Here you’re : they’re almost three times richer than the poorest 10 %. Two point eight times to be precise, counting recent newcomers who haven’t been able to find a place yet. All the same. It’s more than I thought.”

“Excuse me,” I said, “but it’s my turn not to believe you. How can you limit inequalities in this way? Do you cap revenues ?”

“Uh... no. There’s no limit. But when I say the maximum is 40 or 50 times, that’s net of tax. We have progressive taxes, like everyone else. Starting at ten times the median income, the tax should already be around 90 %. I think the top bracket should be at 95 % or 96 %, but that’s not a lot of people.

“So you have confiscatory taxes! Tax evasion must be delirious. There come suitcases full of banknotes!”

“Banknotes? Do you mean cash?”

Indeed, I suddenly remembered they had no cash.

“Still,” I said, “with rates like this, all your rich people must run away.”

“People don’t leave their country so easily. But you are right, those who want at all costs to accumulate, to get rich, to exploit others, are better off trying their luck elsewhere. We didn’t think the loss of these individuals was too bad..”

“You are the only ones to practice such elevated taxes; it will lead you to bankruptcy.”

Further researching my flashphone, I found that the highest income tax brackets hardly went beyond 50 % in OECD countries. However, I realized that this had not always been the case.

Between 1944 and 1964, the top income tax bracket was at 91 % in the United States. In the United Kingdom, with a marginal rate of 99.25 %, a sort of record was set during the Second World War. But a rate of 90 % was maintained during the 1950s and 1960s. And it was still at 83 % on the eve of Margaret Thatcher's came to power in 1978. So during the post-war economic boom, the top income tax bracket rate exceeded 80 %, even 90 %, without the countries that practiced them depopulating, during one of the greatest periods of economic expansion in history and despite the possible suitcases of bills.

Their tax rates were totally insane, but they were not the first to have done so. In any case, that was very far from my issue and I pointed that out to Rosin.

"Of course, right away," he apologized. "What was I thinking? You're one of my very first own clients. I have plenty of time and, you know, I'm just making small talk."

One of his very first customers and he had all the time in the world. Decidedly, he insisted on this. Should I have worried?

"Where were we?" he wondered. "Oh, yes, I was wondering if you'd be willing to hire me as your lawyer. In order for me to represent you, I need a digital flash. But I would understand if you would prefer to ask someone else, more experienced and less talkative."

I couldn't hold it any more, I asked him:

"But, how long have you been practicing?"

"For about six months. My first clients were shared with other lawyers in this firm and, as I told you, you are one of my first own clients."

He was a beginner, all right. I was appalled. He continued:

"I first majored in anthropology before becoming a fisherman and going to law school.

"Fisherman?"

"Yes. You must have seen it on my resume when you picked me out as your lawyer, haven't you?"

I remembered not looking at it and trusting the advice of the woman at the front desk. The picture hanging in the lobby came back to me. I suddenly had an intuition:

"But then," I told him pointing to the photo, "it's... it's you?"

"With my fishing boat!" Rosin confirmed with pride.

I was stunned, speechless. My pseudo lawyer's understood this as an invitation to continue:

"You know, I was a deep-sea soft-billed hake specialist."

"And... about law?" I interrupted him, worried. "You're a lawyer?"

"Of course, I've had my 20 in law school since last Frimaire. Then I had to find my first law firm, so I've only been practicing since then. So, as I was saying, if you'd like to hire a more experienced lawyer..."

But what was this use of the french revolutionary calendar? Did they steal it from us? Or were our revolutionaries inspired by their calendar? In any case, in this country, fishermen were becoming lawyers! I hesitated... But I was not going to go back to the little punk girl covered with piercings! I looked again at the plush interior of the office, the paintings, the armchairs, his salt and pepper hair, his impeccable suit... I resigned myself:

"Dear sir," I said, "you have my trust."

"I thank you for that," he said to me in a sincere tone.

He handed me his little flashphone and I put my fingers on it. Here I was with a lawyer-fisherman for better or, probably, worse.

Offenses and penalties

After I got my file back, Rosin pulled two prints. He handed me one. While he plunged into reading the other copy, I flipped through the documents again. They suddenly brought me back to the inconsistency of the system in which I was immersed.

When Master Rosin had finished his reading, he came back to me, with a darkened face :

“I see,” he said. “This is serious... And you confirm what these witnesses said?”

“But yes. That’s it. They’re confessing it all ! The oral sex, the preparation for sodomy... it’s atrocious. I hope this woman is convicted for the perversion she’s instilled in these children.”

“I’m having a hard time understanding you. If I’ve read this correctly, there are no children involved in the case. The young men who testify are pubescent and they’re certifying their consent and even enjoyment. Your attitude won’t be easy to defend. Attempting to impose a standard of pleasure on others... Your intolerance, blatantly obvious... Well, as far as I’m concerned, I’m not judging you, of course. That’s not my place. But, still, you should be aware that it may shock the judges.”

From his reaction, I understood that a return to rationality was out of the question. I resigned myself again :

“And... And what do I risk ?”

“Let me check.” He looked at his computer. “Yeah, that’s what I was afraid of. You’re facing a reprimand. That would be the strongest penalty that can be administered against you. A reprimand, do you realize!”

“But what is this, exactly ?”

“It’s a public torment.”

“What !” I didn’t dare understand. “What do you mean ?”

“Uh well, yes. It’s what you imagine. A reprimand is the official announcement of wrongdoing and its public condemnation.”

“And what else ?”

“It can even be aggravated with a solemn reprimand, but only if an apology is refused.”

“A solemn reprimand ?”

“Yes, same thing, but with a more solemn, slower ceremony?”

“With any type of physical punishments ?”

“Are you joking ? Public reprimand is a moral sanction. But it’s a severe sanction. You could also be ordered to pay something for the harm done to your victims. For you, it shouldn’t be more than a few hundred winkies for moral damage — a thousand or two thousand, if the judges have risen in a bad mood.”

“But, are you sure there’s nothing else that can happen to me? No prison ? No fine ?”

“It’s already a heavy enough penalty. This is serious.”

“I understand. I’ll be thrown to public vindictiveness. Like in Babylon, where the culprit was delivered to the mob, insulted, beaten...”

“Sure not ! How awful ! Once you are sanctioned, no one will reproach you for your behavior. And if you don’t do it again...”

“... ?”

“Obviously, if malicious intent is proven, it can be as strict as a temporary publication on the internet for a few months. But in your case, there was no threat or injury, and testimony shows that the young adults have no after-effects. In more serious cases, heavier sentences are possible. Our laws don’t mess with the obligation to respect others... Some newcomers who wanted to impose their way of life through violence ended up being deported.”

“But, personally, I’m in danger of being reprimanded, with, at worst, a small, temporary publication ?”

“What else ? You don’t find it tough enough ?”

I had a big smile on my face. The lawyer was thinking. He was puzzled by my relief. He seemed to be thinking. Then he returned my smile back to me. With a knowing look on his face, he told me :

“You other travelers, decidedly, you’re not afraid of much. You’re tough guys.”

I thought about what would have happened to me if I had let the code of the Brotherhood of the Lamb apply to sanction me. My beautiful Clisthène would’ve been able to have me whipped to the blood. Or, even worse : for having intervened on a sexual practice, God knows what she would have invented.

“The kindness of your sanctions gladdens my heart,” I said.

“Kindness ? In my opinion, our normative network is, on the contrary, excessively severe. And our prisons are full ! Nearly ten thousand people are currently incarcerated. This is huge. And we must only have a few thousand places left. We are on the verge of prison overcrowding !”

I was a little reassured by the existence of prisons, but really surprised by this figure.

“Ten thousand people in prison ? Out of about eighty million inhabitants ?”

“Yes, that’s 12 people incarcerated per 100,000. That is huge.”

“In France,” I said, “we have about one hundred people incarcerated per one hundred thousand inhabitants, which is proportionally more than eight times your number of prisoners.”

Rosin seemed to be thinking. Then he resumed :

“Your civilization is so different from ours. With your paper money lying around, illegal exchanges must be frequent.”

“Our underground economy is, by definition, not well known. But it is estimated that the black market and other trafficking could account for around 20 % of GDP in OECD countries.”

“A large percentage of the population must participate. Obviously, that is a lot of offenders. And, in a world as unequal as yours, the poorest must constantly try to rob the rich. Their anger is only natural. But, in such a state of almost perpetual civil war, repression is necessarily savage.”

“You are exaggerating. Our society is much less violent than most. In fact, the United States has an incarceration rate of 693 per 100,000, seven times higher than France !”

“It makes sense, you told me the inequalities in the U.S. are even worse than in France. And, as in Arcania the inequalities are really weaker than in France, our society is naturally less violent. If you add our rejection of paper money...”

“It’s a little simplistic to link delinquency to inequality or cash.”

“There’s also the prohibition of advertising for consumer products. I remember that with the financial argument, the reduction of delinquency was one of the objectives of the general

prohibition of advertising in 1947. This led to a reduction in the average level of frustration and, at the same time, a reduction in delinquency. Perhaps your advertising ban is still too recent to have produced its effects ?”

“But we didn’t ban advertising.”

“This may explain why.”

All he seemed to think about was stealing. But there are many other cases ! From memory, it seemed to me that in France, after property offenses, the offenses that led most to imprisonment are those relating to drug prohibition or the status of foreigners. But my memory of the *junkie* on the loose in Clabourg and the ease with which I had been admitted to this country led me not to insist on these issues. Their outrageous liberalism has had to suppress these offenses, at the cost of a disintegrated society.

“All the same,” I said, “human nature is the same everywhere.”

“Of course,” acknowledged Rosin.

“You must have your sex perverts, your rapists...”

“Sadly yes ! We do. Our sexual charities and our prostitution co-ops are far from having solved this difficult issue of sexual frustration.”

“Sexual charities and prostitution co-operative?”

“Which are far from solving the problems as you might imagine. We still have a long way to go before everyone can enjoy satisfying sexuality. It’s a long road ahead. And I’m sure we’re only a step ahead and your system is moving towards limiting repression as well.”

“Uh... Yes. I mean, in the long run. Our penal system has become rather harsh in recent years... as our inequalities have grown.”

“Obviously,” Rosin continued, as for himself. “The more brutal society is, the weaker the legal system is and the more violence is required to maintain its credibility. In a society like France, with its extreme inequalities, constant publicity, prohibitive sexual morals and paper money, harsh threats may be inevitable. Comparatively, it makes sense that we could have a more measured repressive system than yours, even if it is still quite harsh, in my opinion. Did you know that, under our law, a thief can be sentenced to pay up to four times what he has taken : twice to compensate the loss to the thief and twice to compensate for the social disorder he has caused. Anyone who refuses the sentence or re-offends may be deprived of liberty for three days. For the most serious, violent crimes, whole months, even years of incarceration, can be ordered.”

“By making your sanctions a little harder, you could probably limit your problems a little more.”

“This is debatable. The violence of society increases the violence of the repressive system. But the reverse is also true. Prisons quickly become schools of social and emotional breakdown. Crime produces prison that produces crime. The vicious circle, *par excellence*. It is also for this reason that we try to ensure decent treatment for our prisoners, to reduce imprisonment and, more generally, to soften sentences.”

“And do you think you can do better? Eradicate crime one day? One day eradicate prisons ?”

“A few decades ago, the Purity Party prevailed and decided to completely eradicate crime through systematic surveillance measures, including video surveillance and biometric monitoring. Its members were dismissed in less than six months. Think for a moment about what needs to be put in place to prevent *any* deviation, any risk. It is no longer our ambition to abolish crime ! Nor do we want to avoid any sanctions. We have prisons, a police force... We are simply trying

to minimize the use of these brutal and potentially criminogenic tools. Without any illusions : the human being will always be a potential danger for his fellow human beings.”

After a short period of silence, we moved on to a discussion on the tactics that should be adopted in my defense. Rosin tried to explain to me that it’s better to acknowledge and apologize. This Ms. Ehrig’s testimony seemed measured. By insisting on my foreign education, on the shock of the accident, she herself could probably grant me a pardon, which would help to limit my sentence to a simple observation. In any case, I was hardly at risk. In this case, their system was suiting me well.

I let him finish explaining his defense ideas to me and I thanked him sincerely. This man may have been a beginner, but he was warm and knowledgeable. Perhaps this was due to the paradoxical proximity of his graduation. In any case, he had freed me from great anxiety. And he didn’t ask me for a penny. We shook hands vigorously. The morning had been rich in emotions — a little too much for my taste. But I had regained my purchasing power and the threat of criminal sanctions on my head had vanished. I took a look at the panoramic view that illuminated this office, over Nehushtân, over the sea.

This time, when the magneto stopped, I jumped in it. I imitated the other passengers by passing my knuckles over the device at the entrance. The crossing of Nehushtân was like a gliding flight. After gliding between tall glass buildings, I flew over an Asian universe — where I saw a sublime pagoda sparkling with gold, then a set of disparate and unclassifiable buildings, simply delimited by these canals that criss-crossed the city, with their incessant boat traffic. The magneto suddenly passed through a forest of immense lifts to which clusters of bubble-dwellings were hung, colorful and decorated with balconies and terraces covered with vegetation. A gull was slowly hovering in the distance. The sea came towards me in a breath.

The magneto landed softly, directly on the beach. A group of young people in bathing suits escaped from it laughing and ran into the water. I took the time to take off my shoes before jumping off the magneto onto the sand.

I walked along the sea, bewitched by the slow unwinding of its rolls. Not so exciting for surfing, I told myself inwardly. The salty smell of the sea spray went to my head. I felt trapped in my suit. The passage of a group of forty-somethings in colorful clothes, jumping astride large jumping balloons, relaxed me. Decidedly, anything goes. After a short hesitation I took off my jacket and sat down directly on the hot sand, at the risk of damaging my nice new pants.

“Mister Debourg ! Hey ! Mister Debourg !”

I was being called in a clear, juvenile voice. It was not the voice of Clithène. But it might have been my mistake.

“Ohé ! Ohé !”

I saw, running towards me, a boy in swimming trunks, just out of the water. He had just pulled himself out of a group of young men his own age, who were still playing ball, a little further down in the water. Dribbling seawater, he shone in the sun, proud, aware of his teenage beauty. He came close to me, without embarrassment.

“I didn’t recognize you in your funny costume, he smiles and says.

He seemed ready to laugh, but he was holding back. I looked at him, eyes wide open. I stammered :

“But... uh... young man...”

“You don’t recognize me ? Josuah ! I’m the boy from the hotel. Do you remember me? This morning ? When you had your big white dress.”

“Ah yes, yes...”

I was putting him back on now. But shouldn’t he be working, or studying ?

The school and the beach

“Come on don’t make that face !” threw my young landlord at me.

Shaking his hand in one go, he sent me a few drops of water. I startled and he laughed.

“May I seat ?” He asked me.

Without giving me time to answer, he sat down next to me and explained :

“I’m a little tired of playing ball. And then, a newcomer like you, completely lost, arriving in Nehushtân like that, without understanding anything, it’s fun. I could guide you if you want.

“I.. I’m not lost.”

“Then, tell me what it’s like in your country. For example, do you eat at home with chopsticks? With a fork and a knife ? With your hands ?”

To him, I was a curiosity. But I didn’t dislike it.

“We eat with a fork and a knife, mostly,” I told him.

“It’s lame ! I prefer to eat with my hands ! And you don’t have a flashphone in your country yet, right ? I saw that you couldn’t use it properly!”

“Yes, yes ! We call them cellular phones ; well, smartphones. Sometimes I have a little trouble using them, but I have children around your age who know how to use them perfectly.”

“Oh well ! So if you’re lost, it’s because you’re very old,” he laughed.

“Let’s not exaggerate,” I said, a little offended. “And you, how old did you say you were?”

“Fourteen”

“And what grade are you in ?”

“Uh... what do you mean?”

“I mean, at school, in which year are you? In France, you should be in ninth grade.”

“In ninth grade?”

“What’s your school level, my boy ?”

“I am forty-three and I have level one fundamentals.”

It’s my turn to widen my eyes. He started explaining :

“I am already level ten in cooking, nine in hotel business and twelve in math ! Not bad, isn’t it?”

“I.. I don’t know what that means. At home, we don’t count like that.”

“On average, you hit ten in a subject at eighteen. At least that’s what they say. Of course it’s an average.”

“And you’re already at 12 in math at fourteen!”

“Not bad, hey ? Well, in French, English and Spanish, for the moment I’m at three, and that’s really because it was mandatory to pass level one of the fundamentals. I’ve never done literature and I don’t care. And in any language !”

“And you’ve been studying other topics ?”

“I have two in philosophy,” my young hotelier said, “and then again... — he counted on his fingers as he thought — three in biology..., four in music and, above all”, he added proudly, “I’m fourteen in the game of go, which is equivalent to third dan. And I had my average of four in first

level fundamentals last year. I still haven't started law, history, geography or physics. I'll need to do a little bit to get past the second level fundamentals. But I'm a little scared I'm gonna end up with kids. I'll have to find myself a class just for late bloomers."

"Oh well," I said, "it's complicated. Anything else?"

"No, I think that's it. Not too bad, no? Especially at go! I can crush you when you want!"

I told him I'd heard about the game, but I didn't know the rules. Which seemed to amuse him. I also told him that I didn't understand all of his gibberish. I explained to him the system in Western countries, with studies organized by year, not by level and subject. He thought it was silly, if someone liked math or cooking, he should be able to progress thoroughly in these subjects. And he didn't see any reason why he should be prevented from going to the next level, on the pretext that he didn't like other subjects, or that he didn't care, or that he wasn't good at it. And, besides, by digging into something right away, you can find a better job and earn more. So he, with his level in the hotel business, he wasn't doing badly. But that didn't stop him from going on with the rest. In any case, he explained to me that studies are compulsory until the age of 25. And, later, he would have liked to become a great pastry chef. He told me that the levels were won in big exams organized all over the country and that you could take several of them a year. And that, by the way, his mathematics teacher was level thirty in his subject, the maximum level, and that he was only seventeen years old.

I was understanding then that with such a mess, it was perhaps not impossible that the punk girl from earlier could have become a lawyer so young. I also remembered that this kid told me that a full-time job was sixteen hours a week. Which in theory could give you time to study. This also explained why Rosin could have been a junior lawyer at over forty, after being a fisherman. But I didn't see at all how a society could function with citizens who worked so little.

"And then I'm also six in Knydep!" added Josuah, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Knydep?"

"Yes, it sucks as a title, but it's fun as a class; besides, you're often alone in front of the teacher; there are no notes and a lot of practical exercises. I like it."

"What's that?"

"It's 'Knowing yourself and developing pleasures'. It is compulsory to follow at least three modules, once at the age of six-seven, once at the age of twelve-fourteen and once at the age of twenty-five. But there are some who are addicted to it and follow it all their lives."

"You study this stuff at school?"

"Well yes, not you?"

"Obviously, if it'll allow people to seek out what they like before they reach retirement age."

"If you like, you could come to my school. We have a few old people in all the classes. Besides, for those over 40, it's always nice to take a knydep class."

"I haven't been going to school in a long time, you know."

"Really?"

"I'm a professor," I said, "I graduated a long time ago."

"So you completely stopped?"

"Yes, it's no use to me anymore. I already have a doctorate; that's the highest level of education we have."

"Here too, we have old people quitting. But it is rare that they stop completely; they keep at least two or three hours a week. They say that when you quit, your brain gets shrinking."

I frowned.

“I didn’t mean that to you, sir. I’m sure you’re fine. And what do you teach ?”

“I’m a law professor.”

“Law ? Ew yucky!”

“Well, all the same, it can be interesting” I tried to convince him.

“Obviously, if the law in your country is as weird as you are,” he said unannounced in passing on a first-name basis, “it must be funny. Maybe I could try one of your classes ?”

I couldn’t help but be flattered by the familiarization and the start of interest.

“Why not ? But you’re a little young. Normally, I teach at the university.”

“ ... ”

“I mean that in your system, my classes are at least level ten... well, I guess...”

“You could probably give me a little leeway, no ?” He said in a mischievous tone.

“Uh... I don’t know...”

“And, in Nehushtân, in which academy ?”

“Uh well, the truth is... I only teach in France.”

“Ah well.”

He looked disappointed, and I was too. I thought I would have enjoyed having him for a student. That was an idea, by the way. There must have been some sort of college somewhere in this town. Maybe I could have given lectures and met some colleagues. I knew some from many countries. Once you get past the superficial layer of customs and languages, among law professors, we understand each other very well : this respect for ancestral traditions, this shared taste for rigorous description and technical detail, this same refusal of sentimentalism... I must have found colleagues. That would have given me contacts. And wasn’t the French civil law one of the best in the world ? Maybe I could have given some conferences ? For a second I could imagine myself in a beautiful apartment in the quiet neighborhood of my clothing store. I would have come back after a course given to young ephebes still gilded from the beach sun. Clithène would have been waiting for me. She would have prepared a meal and... But I came back to myself. In the warm breeze blowing from the sea, my charming hotel waiter was almost finished drying. I asked him:

“Do you know where they teach law school at a good level ?”

“No, but just go to orientation. They’re available at all the job fairs.”

“Could you tell me where to find one ?”

I was handing him my flashphone. He smiled.

He put a cross on my map. He told me he was happy to see that I was settling in. He took my hand. I was getting warm on this beach, in my nice clothes, I was feeling sticky. The boy looked me straight in the eye and asked me why I didn’t go swimming. Suddenly I felt powerfully attracted to the water. To leave my clothes there, to walk on the warm sand, straight, with a steady step, and suddenly to dive, to melt into the fresh and salty water. With a wink, Josuah told me he had a towel, that he’d lend it to me if I wanted it. How adorable was this kid ! When I’d get used to this strange city, maybe I could buy him an ice cream or a cake to thank him. I was both embarrassed and pleased at the same time by such an idea. I stood up and said:

“Another time. I must go.”

Josuah told me that, anyway, we’d meet at the hotel. He added that in Nehushtân, we kiss each other when we split up. He gave me one on the cheek. I didn’t dare give it back to him. I waved my hand and quickly moved away.

My flashphone pointed me in the direction of the Labor Exchange. From there, I could easily reach the university. I went in search of my own, the law professors. I was sure they'd help me.

The Kouad Academy

I learned what they say about our economic customs and discovered a temporal key that is supposed to allow one thing (the direction by an entrepreneur of his business), and its opposite (self-management).

This “Labor Exchange” was a kind of employment center. I just wanted to collect some simple information. But I came across this stubborn old woman in her ridiculous kid’s outfit, with her green and white hair, her worn out jeans and her T-shirt covered with felt pen drawings.

Job seeker

She insisted :

“You told me you’ve been a law professor for over 20 years.”

“That’s right.”

“And you really want to continue ? You don’t have enough ?”

“But since I’m telling you that I don’t !”

“Still, we have very diverse available jobs : nurse, midwife, dressmaker, secretary...”

“But it’s not at all fitting me, I assure you.”

“Justly so, you need to get out of your usual frames a little bit. No offense, but I saw who I was dealing with. I know the jobs I’m offering you are pretty feminized outside of miasarchy. Practicing one for a while might help you break free from your gender bias. You’re a newcomer. I assure you it would do you a lot of good. Believe me, I’m used to it. It might even free you sexually. How about a maintenance job in a hospital? It’s a job that requires a lot of empathy, that can make you feel real human warmth, and it only requires a fairly short training. I can arrange something for you as an apprentice.”

I couldn’t take it anymore, I snapped :

“Madam, I’m not a lackey ! I’m a college professor.”

“Obviously, obviously... I may be moving a little fast. Do you have children?”

“I don’t see the point ! How dare you interfere...”

“I was telling myself that maybe during your paternity leave, when the mother of your children was at work, you had an opportunity to feel...”

“I’ve got two kids, but I didn’t take paternity leave, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She sounded devastated when she heard that answer.

“It’s terrible, sir. Obviously, I’m not blaming you. Besides, even in Arcania, you know, we haven’t fully resolved the issue of sexism yet. That is why paternity leave is equal to double the amount of maternity leave and why it is compulsory... So, to begin with, fathers take a little more care of their children than mothers. The latter go back to work and the fathers stay at home, which helps to curb certain macho impulses. Because there are some, even here ! What do you want, Arcania is an open country. We are under the influence of our neighbors and we have to constantly raise the bar.”

So this country was taking children away from their mothers and handing them over to the incompetence of their fathers, I told myself. But it didn’t matter. I was not going to get into big discussions with this hysterical woman. I told her again for the fifth times :

“Madam, I’m a teacher and I want to do my job.”

“Really ? I don’t know how to say this... it would do you so much good. If you stay in education, you could become a nursery school teacher. If you have not been able to take care of your children, you will discover so many things...”

“Do you only have female jobs in your country?”

“Oh, that’s not the point. You know, there’s work everywhere. What I was saying was I was just trying to help you. I’m not imposing. If you don’t like what I’m offering, maybe you can start your own business? Nothing simpler, I can arrange for you to meet a Fund agent who will help you to...”

“Listen, you’re not gonna do the ‘make yourself your own job’ thing. I already have a job. I’m a university teacher!”

“I’ve understood that you’ve been playing the professor for 20 years. So much so that now you say you ‘are’ this job. But I can’t let you go on like this.”

“Madam, I have skills I intend to practice.”

“Just before, you told me you like to cook. I have a position here as a home cook with training included that you might like.”

“But I have a job, madam! You’d better take care of finding work for the unemployed.”

“The ‘unemployed’ ?”

“Yes, those who are unemployed, who don’t have a job and are looking for one. You must have some, unemployed people.”

“Ah yes, yes, of course, excuse me. I didn’t understand. We call these people between jobs ‘transitioners’. And of course we do, our labor exchange is even dedicated to them.”

“And you don’t have a problem with your ‘transitioners’ ?”

“We do ! For sure ! Not everyone finds the job they dream of. If you listened to them, people would all want to be musicians, tuning mechanics, actors, firemen, dancers, filmmakers, football champions... Some of them would brave and search for weeks before accepting a job. But hey, as I always say, if you have a passion, refuse overtime and do what you like in your free time. For example, you would have asked me for a job in tension, as a clown, I would have tried to dissuade you from it, or I would have had to send you on long studies with a not too demanding side job.”

“I am not a clown, madam !”

“Well, well. So, what job would you like ? If you’re reasonable, I can find it in less than a week !”

“But I’ve been trying so hard to tell you that from the start ! I am a professor of French law.”

“And you really want to remain that ? If you ask me...”

“I’m not asking for your opinion. And, by the way, you’ve already given it to me six times. I just want to get in touch with my peers so I can offer them my services !”

“Don’t get mad. Anyway, it’s up to you. I was just saying that to help you. Besides, according to my databases, the legal profession is being feminized overseas. So it’s not so bad, even for a highly gendered newcomer like you. And a connoisseur of French law is a curiosity. This type of teaching could be of interest to certain academies.”

Well, she seemed to have figured it out. She was going through her papers.

“Do you prefer to try your luck in an academy with egalitarian WA or with WA and GS?”

“But whatever, madam ! I don’t even know what that gibberish means. All I want is to be able to meet other *professors* to talk and ask them if they are interested in some lectures.”

“For these kinds of questions, just take any information leaflet on academia.”

“But that’s all I’m asking !”

Clearly annoyed, she handed me a flyer. But, before I could get my hands on it, she changed her mind. She opened it and circles four green and three red phone numbers, then she explained :

“I still circled you the most dynamic academies. They probably have positions. In green, I have selected you egalitarian WAs and, in red, WAs with GS who are developing well. The Kouad academy is booming. This may be the easiest place to go. — she circled it in red a second time. — It’s your call. Obviously, it’s a WA with GS, but reasonable.”

“Madam, like I told you before, I don’t know what your gibberish means. And I’m completely uninterested.”

Her eyes blazed for a second.

“But of course, sir,” she said to me in an icy tone.

She passed me her leaflet, then dismissed me with:

“Good bye sir and good luck in your job search.”

It had taken me almost three-quarters of an hour to get that leaflet. What a waste of time ! I should have started directly by asking her for the addresses, without answering all her questions about my tastes and skills. It’s really hard to get away from counter staff in this country.

Its leaflet gave many addresses, with a list of the courses that were given there and their level. I decided to start with the academy she had circled twice in red.

It seemed to me that the best thing to do was to contact it by videoconference, to flash it, as they say, to make local color. I chose a very clean, very traditional building as a background. I welcomed my new clothes, I fixed my hairstyle and I dialed the number. I explained my situation to the young secretary who picked up the phone. Very kind, she invited me to visit their academy, looked at a schedule and told me she could even arrange an appointment for me at the end of the afternoon with Affoué Kouad.

I should have looked at the academy location before I agreed to the meeting. I had to take a suburban train, and understand their free electric bike rental system... I found myself pedaling on a small dirt road vaguely marked out in the middle of a meadow. With one hand, I was holding the handlebars ; with the other, my flashphone whose map was guiding me. The bike, propelled by its engine, was going way too fast. At every bump or hollow, it threatened to throw me to the ground. By the way, all this was far too rural to lead to anything resembling a university in any way, shape or form.

The path led me to a village of about twenty alpine style chalets with thatched roofs. They were perfectly incongruous in this plain landscape. Their ground floor was made of stone and the first floor of dark, almost black wood. I set foot on the ground, parked my bike, and walked in carefully. There were no streets or roads between these buildings : just open gardens and paths where a few people of different ages were wandering here and there. Only a small central square was vaguely urbanized. Its paving of two-colored stones was drawing a kind of sun. The rough joints of the paving stones let out a few clumps of weeds and wildflowers.

My flashphone pointed to a cottage, located on the edge of the village, rather small and which did not look very nice. At the door, a plaque read ‘Kouad Academy’. I resolved to discreetly shake the bell hanging from the door. It was a rather big bell, similar to the ones that used to be hung around the necks of cows. I was about to shake it again, a little louder, when a small dry man with a broad bald forehead and a scowling face came to open the door. At least, with his little glasses, he looked like a real intellectual. That was something. Just in case, I shook his hand vigorously, with that conniving smile that suits colleagues :

“Good afternoon, let me introduce myself : Sébastien Debourg. I have an appointment with Professor Kouad.”

“Good afternoon, Mister Debourg,” the man said. “You are expected. Professor Kouad will receive you. Follow me, please.”

We crossed the village to go to another chalet, a little bigger than the others. My guide carelessly shook a bell and entered without further formality. He led me directly to the first floor by a creaky and rough staircase. He respectfully knocked on the door. A woman came to open the door. Black, thin, she was wearing tight leather trousers and a purple sweater a little ‘flashy’. Her long, frizzy hair was gathered in fine braids at the front and formed a big airy ball at the back. She must have been about thirty-five years old. She had a foam pipe stuck between her teeth, with a sculpted hearth representing a horse’s head. She shook my hand energetically.

“The smoke, it’s just light THC vapor,” she informed me. “It doesn’t bother you, does it ?”

“Uh...No, no,” I replied, embarrassed.

“Do I lend you a pipe?”

“No, uh, no thanks.”

“You are Sébastien, correct?”

“I... Uh... Yes. Sébastien Debourg, nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too ! Affoué Kouad. You can call me Affoué. Really pleased to meet you, Sébastien.”

I desperately clung to her pipe, which was the only thing that made this person a bit of a teacher. For the rest, she reminded me of a nail salon owner on Boulevard Barbès.

She took me into a library lounge. The fireplace, the cuckoo clock and the stuffed cow’s head hanging on the wall seemed to come straight from a Swiss chocolate wrapper. Fortunately, a desk covered with paper and topped with two computer screens gave the place some credibility. Deep leather armchairs framed a coffee table. The man who led me in left without a word. My hostess signaled me to settle down. I sat on a quarter buttock in one of the chairs. Affoué wedged herself deep into the one facing it. The intellectual with glasses came back to put down two wooden bowls, a steaming teapot, teaspoons and a sugar bowl. Affoué thanked him :

“Thanks Marco ! It’s cool.”

“Of nothing my little crazy,” he replied in a casual tone.

He walked away, stiff and dignified, like a butler, with the tray under his arm. ‘Professor’ Kouad, without taking her pipe out of her teeth, served us a very black tea. After putting three sugars in her bowl, she handed me the sugar bowl. Normally, I don’t sugar, but it seemed more appropriate not to refuse her offer. I took one sugar. She stirred her tea slowly and carefully. Not knowing what to do with my hands, I imitated her. We scraped our metal spoons together on the wood of the bowls.

Affoué Kouad took a big puff from her pipe, then slowly exhaled it. Through the curtain of smoke that rose between us, her shining eyes were planted in mine.

“So, Sébastien ?” she asked abruptly. “Tell me exactly what you’ve come to propose.”

I didn’t dare to back out. I explained to her my situation, my recent arrival in Nehushtân, my job. She asked me questions, asked me if I could find some of my work on the Internet to corroborate my statements. We went to her office. Surfing on one of her computers, I managed to navigate on my university’s website, retrieve my appointment as a professor and download several of my articles. She asked me which ones I considered the most important and printed them out. We went back to the chairs. While she flipped through my writings, very concentrated,

I didn't dare to say anything and I kept myself busy drinking my tea. It was much too bitter. I should have sweetened it more. But this kind of examination reassured me. Thus concentrated on my writings, this woman looked much more like a colleague. Finally, she straightened up.

"It's really exciting, Sébastien. You're the bearer of rare knowledge."

I stood up with pride. Finally someone who recognized my merits. She seemed hesitant, however.

"Obviously," she continued, "here you couldn't teach law. I don't see what a normativity expert could find in your semi-despotic standards."

As I was about to protest, she quickly resumed :

"But, like I said, what you bring is valuable. Your posture is extraordinarily off. And our knowledge of early civilizations is very limited. I think a course on the ways and customs of the West will attract a lot of people. Especially if it's clear that it's made by a true native, newly arrived and still imbued with the beliefs of his people. Our ethnology students will be very interested."

"I... I don't quite get it."

"It means I can offer you a few lectures on a trial basis."

"Well, uh... Why not ?"

"Would you be interested in a part-time contract for a month, as a trial ?"

Was I really going to commit to such a long time ? She immediately perceived my hesitation, but did not understand the source of it :

"But what was I thinking?" She said. "Obviously, you can't pronounce yourself like that. I didn't explain anything to you. We're a good little WA, one year seniority and my GS at five is already seven years old."

"..."

"To be more precise, your weekly conference hour will be paid as half time even if you stay below fifteen, at seven hundred and fifty winkies the first month and, if it works, full time at one thousand eight hundred, not counting the deducted progressivity bonuses, net of the CoDew refund, of course. Does that sound fine to you ?"

"Uh yes, yes," I just said. "But, uh, what would I commit to exactly ?"

"Following the conventions, for a half time, you owe one hour of class per week, participation in evaluations and, during your contract, you must mention your association with the academy in your research. I imagine that you will want to write about our system and compare it to yours. Well, you'll see. If it takes and you're successful, you'll go full time, with bonuses and overtime. You can quickly rise to three thousand winkies, net of ETD. So ? What about that ?"

There seemed to be talk of remuneration for one hour of classes per week. It's kind of unexpected, but fun. For me, this hiring would have been a kind of official status in Arcania. I'd have been able to be taken seriously by Clisthène. With any luck, she'd even have been sensitive to the teacher's prestige and fantasy. All her idiot surfer would have had to do was go and play with his board. It was a windfall. I preferred not to ask for any further explanations, for fear of revealing the extent of my ignorance about their system. I gave the conniving smile that I had reserved for the doorman at the reception desk and, in a confident tone, I agreed :

"It's perfect ! I agree with pleasure !"

Affoué struck a big blow with the flat of her hand on the coffee table.

"Deal!" She launched. "I will support you at the recruiting council."

"It isn't you who decides?"

"Of course not! I'm a tribune."

“What’s that?”

“It’s kind of like being an Indian chief. My duties give me the right to speak in all assemblies, but they prohibit me from taking part in deliberations and decision-making. But hey,” she added with malice, “as a founder, referent and elder, in practice, my influence is not entirely nil.”

“The academy is named after you and you don’t run it?” I asked with surprise.

“Uh, yes and no.”

“How come?”

“I am the founder, all the same. And to be elected tribune is a great honor. Besides, my salary as tribune is not the lowest in the academy. I might as well say that I’m not complaining. I even campaign for reelection every year. This election is a recognition of my influence and therefore a good reason to exclude me from all decision-making committees.”

She inhaled a long, satisfied puff, then slowly exhaled it through her mouth and nose. Her face disappeared for a moment in the smoke, only to reappear smiling.

“But whatever. The point is, with my support, your recruitment is going pretty well. Now we just need to come up with an initial conference theme to woo the board. You need something a little eye-catching..”

Animism, economism and other esoteric practices of the Overwest

After thinking about it for a while, she asked :

“Any ideas?”

“‘General introduction to french law’?” I proposed.

She made a sullen pout and seemed to be still thinking. She suggested :

“Why not instead : ‘Between hypocrisy and fiction : the values of equality and freedom in capitalo-despotic regimes’?”

I was opening my eyes. She thought for a moment and proposed :

“Or maybe ‘Animism in the modern Overwest’?”

My eyes widened even more. She explained :

“One says that you believe in regulatory spirits that inhabit your markets and supermarkets. It is also said that, according to your founding myths, living spirits are born from organizations, that they take possession of the souls of your leaders and impose their will on them.”

“Decidedly,” I said, “between our civilizations there are many misunderstandings. We have no such thing.”

“Here is something which is interesting. It contradicts the writings of Ragbeer!”

“Ragbeer ?”

“He’s an ethnologist at the academy. He has learned for years, through immersion in the Overwest. According to him, you equate organizations of people with living beings, with a life of their own. That would be the influence of your dominant religion, Catholicism. He says that, according to this ideology, all believers form a living whole, perfectly analogous to a living body, the ‘Body of Christ’.”

“This belief does exist, but it’s lost a lot of influence and...”

“Still according to Ragbeer, your organizations remain patterned after this model. Your ‘companies’, ‘nations’ and ‘families’ would be treated like some sort of living deities in which you subsume yourself.”

“But not at all!”

“I also thought it was weird. He goes so far as to say that you give them fundamental human rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom to come and go, the right to a home, to privacy, even that you give them compensation for their ‘sufferings’.”

“Effectively,” I admitted, “the most recent European and American case law recognizes certain fundamental rights for companies as such. From this point of view, your Mr Ragbeer is well informed. But it is quite logical. Companies are more than the individuals that make them up. They have interests, a will of their own.”

“A willpower, without a brain nor a body ? So it’s definitely a mystical thought.”

“A company leader expresses the interest and will of the enterprise, just as the head of state expresses the general interest.”

“Do you mean that when the leader speaks, it’s not really the leader that speaks, but the higher entity, which he has merged into and is the leader of, who is expressing itself?”

“Let’s say that he is the spokesperson for this entity.”

“Awesome ! This could be an exciting topic for an intervention. I’m sure the students would love to see a real professor from the Overwest defending the theories Ragbeer describes... and believing them himself ! We could follow up your speech with a commentary by Ragbeer.”

“I don’t see the point in presenting such mundane things,” I replied angrily.

“It’s as you want, really as you want,” Affoué retracted. “Maybe later. In the meantime...”

She thought while leafing through a book. I could read its title : *Mysticism and magical practices in the Overwest*. I was afraid it would have been very difficult to agree on a theme. After a few moments, Affoué proposed :

“ ‘Of abstruse faith in the Overwest?’ ”

“Abstruse? I don’t see what this could be,” I said discouraged.

“Abstruses are a small sect active in Arcania. According to this book, it is a very important religion in your country. But under another name... which I can’t find.”

“Maybe if you explain it to me.”

“Our abstruses practice an art of divination based on mathematics. They’re a kind of numerologists. On certain street corners you will find their trailers where, for a few winkies, they will run big computers full of numbers and tell you the future situation and the foreseeable evolution of the markets.”

“We have fortune tellers, crystal ball readers... but nothing like this.”

“Wait, I’m checking the encyclopedia, — she was tapping her flashphone — according to the *atlas of religions*, in the Overwest, you’d call the abstruses ‘neoclassical economists’ or ‘econometricians’.”

“These names target certain categories of economists. But they are not soothsayers living in trailers!”

“According to *The Atlas*, the ‘econometricians’, or ‘abstruse “, would profess a kind of secular religion, much like some Buddhism. They would preach a hypostasized vision of the human being, understood as rational, freed from all submission, from all training, from all empathy. A kind of superman in search of a systematic maximization of his gains, free of his inconsistencies, compassion, ignorance and all gregarious instincts.”

“None of our economists claim that human beings are truly calculating and rational. They simply explain that certain economic mechanisms work as if they were. Moreover, they are constantly improving their systems to better take into account other human or societal dimensions.”

“Oh really ? Our abstruse people always start from a lot of perfectly unrealistic hypotheses.”

“Uh... our economists recognize the partial lack of realism of their assumptions.”

“And they claim to predict the future ?”

“It’s one of their goals, yes.”

“While assuming they’re based on partially unrealistic initial conditions, they claim to *actually* predict the future ?”

“Of course, when you put it that way. But you will recognize that there is no effective working knowledge that doesn’t neglect a part of reality.”

“Still one should neglect what is negligible ! The problem with our abstruse is not that they neglect something, but that they neglect all the contributions of psychology, habits, irrational

obedience, empathy, conditioned reflexes... In short, they neglect almost every aspect of human nature.”

“I know a little bit about the work of our neoclassical econometricians. It is remarkably clever!”

“Interpretations of mystical exegetes of sacred texts can also be very clever. I never said that our abstruse people were idiots. It’s just that their predictions are no more certain than those of fortune tellers.”

“True, the predictions of our econometricians are not always very reliable either,” I admitted. “I remember reading a study that compared economists’ business cycle predictions with the prediction that the next year will be the same as the year before. And this was actually worth about that.”

“Do you mean they can predict the future about as well as randomly ?”

“Results aren’t always there,” I admitted. “But our economists say sensible things.”

“Fortune sometimes does things right,” approved Affoué. “Our abstruse can say convincing things too. I remember that when the vote for the restoration of the inheritance was taken, they were clearly on the right side.”

“The restoration of the inheritance ? You didn’t have any ?”

“I can reassure you ! We still don’t have one, fortunately ! The vote has been pushed back to over 80 %. Truly, this barbaric custom of giving the children of the rich more than the children of the poor..”

I was a bit flabbergasted that they didn’t recognize an institution as universal and natural as inheritance. But I left her continue :

“Last year, a group of archaeologists managed to organize a referendum for the restoration of the inheritance. The abstruse opposed it with determination.”

“Your abstruse opposed inheritance ?”

“But yes ! And with some very amusing arguments. They claimed that restoring the inheritance would generate a generational war. Children would have a vested interest in killing their parents to inherit. And, to protect themselves, the parents would have no choice but to shoot first.”

“But it’s ridiculous ! Inheritance is the rule in France, and murders of ascendants to inherit are extremely rare.”

“I suspected so. But, for an abstruse used to seeing only optimization and calculation and to favor the study of what has a price and can be sold, it’s rather logical.”

I was well aware that our economists do not blame inheritance for causing generational wars. But I didn’t know why.

“And your abstruses, I ask, do they have a lot of influence ?”

“From the bottom of their trailers, they keep a certain clientele,” Affoué admitted. “We want so much, so badly to know the future. So, even though all their past predictions have proven to be wrong many times over, they continue to have some success. It’s so easy for humans to believe whatever suits them. It is not soon that they will abandon their gods, their entrails readers, their astrologers, nor their abstruses.”

“You’re putting a little bit of everything in the same basket,” I noted. “Your abstruses use imperfect mathematical models perhaps, but perfectly rational. The same cannot be said for fortune tellers.”

“According to Cynthia Lee, abstruses would be the followers of a long tradition, begun by Pythagoras. According to her, this thinker used his mathematical genius as a preamble to demonstrate great mystical-religious theories. It was to read the future that astrologers discovered the equations of motion of the planets. Even the soothsayers who read the entrails of animals sometimes relied on real biological knowledge. Abstruses perpetuate these great mixtures of knowledge and charlatanism to predict the future. And my fellow citizens are so superstitious... If we have to rank the soothsayers, I would say that abstruses are a little more influential than astrologers, but significantly less influential than the fortune tellers and stick-throwers. Divination methods based on pure chance correspond so well to the unpredictability of the future that their appeal is always great.”

“You mean that in Arcania the great political choices are inspired by tarot readers?”

“This remains marginal, in my opinion. But how can we know? No one’s going to brag about consulting an abstruse or a fortune teller.”

“In France,” I confessed, “our political leaders cannot take any decision without having officially consulted our econometricians and recorded their predictions. At the level of the European Union or the IMF too, their calculations are held in very high esteem and their conclusions openly guide most political choices.”

“In Ancient Greece, no important decision could be made without consulting Pythia. Your decision-makers are the followers of this ancient and powerful tradition. They follow the oracle of the initiates. In this context, I understand better why you grant so little power to the people.”

“Still, we are in a democracy. The people vote ! They choose.”

“And if the people vote against the ‘advice’ of your ‘economists’ ?

“But they do it sometimes, out of ignorance, out of whim. It’s also, for a certain electorate, a way to complain. Fortunately, once elected, our leaders have so far been able to remain rational. And with a little pedagogy...”

“You mean that your leaders follow the oracle of your abstruses rather than the will of the voters... A will that you value no more than the tears and cries of a baby? I guess it’s inevitable once you believe in the magic power of the soothsayers. I’m glad our abstruse people are marginalized in their poor trailers.”

“Because you, in your country, prefer decisions made by ignorant people, without thought?”

“In misarchy, great efforts are made to make information available to everyone. Commissions of experts ensure the dissemination of information. And they issue opinions. But we know that no expertise is completely neutral. We therefore try as much as possible to have expert opinions and counter-expertise. Above all, we know that all knowledge efforts never generate a solid forecast of human society, nor lead to an unambiguous political decision. And so, in the end, we believe that it is up to those who will suffer the decision to take it, for better or for worse.”

I got some more tea as this conversation was exhausting me. I didn’t know what to say and this woman had a gift for confusing me. She was looking at me deeply, with seriousness and curiosity, like an entomologist who would have just pinpointed a new species of butterfly. If, at least, I had been confronted with the old man with glasses, a little bald, with his big eyebrows, it would have been easier. But to have trouble convincing a young, black, beautiful woman, on top of that, is humiliating. I sunk deeper into my chair. To my astonishment, this was the moment that Affoué chose to congratulate me :

“You have a hell of a sentimental ear,” she told me. “In our conversation, these feelings we both have, our empathy for each other, I have to say it’s amazing.”

Her voice had gone soft. I didn't dare understand. I was blushing a little. I didn't know what to say. I stammered :

"I... you... you're very beautiful... but I..."

Affoué interrupted me :

"That's not what I meant at all. Personally, I'm attracted to very young men and somewhat mature women, and you don't fit into either category."

I was shocked, moved and a little disappointed by this admission. But Affoué gave me a really warm smile and, in the end, I felt rather reassured.

"What I meant was that even in a reasoned discussion like the one we just had, what we exchange first are feelings."

We remained silent for a few moments. I was looking at her. She looked so young to me. I wanted to say something clever, but Affoué wouldn't let me enough time :

"Our conversation fascinates me," she said, "but the clock is ticking. We're going to have to find your first topic of lecture without too much delay. What do you think of : 'Abstruse, econometricians and practice of the divinatory arts in the Overwest' ?"

"Honestly," I said, "I'm a lawyer, not an economist."

"Got it, let's go for law. And what would seem possible to you?"

"In all logic, I should start with the basics of french private law : the law of obligations and the law of property."

It was her turn not to understand me.

"The law of obligations," I explained, "governs contracts and liability. The law of property is the law that regulates the relationship to things. It is mainly ownership law."

"Ownership ? — her face lit up — I've heard about the power of this concept in the capitalist universe ! Wouldn't this be a kind of absolute, limitless right granted to a person over something?"

"In theory, yes, but..."

"What would you think of a generic title like : 'Myths from the Overwest : omnipotence, eternal life and ownership' ?"

Decidedly, this woman wanted to impose on me a title full of negative *preconceptions* about my system. But I no longer had the strength to plunge myself into a new discussion and, obviously, she didn't have the time. I would tell what I wanted in my lecture. And starting a legal introduction with property law was a good idea. If I wanted to rehabilitate a bit of our system for them, it might even have been a great place to start. Our property law was the result of two thousand years of roman tradition : it could only impress them.

"Very good theme," I agreed. "You got it."

Affoué gave me a big smile while looking me straight in the eyes. Then she slapped her hand on the coffee table again. As the shaken teapot stabilized, she exclaimed :

"Deal ! That's what I'll present to the committee. All you have to do is fill out the application form and read the standards book. The contact person is Danái, second on the left, after the ash tree, third chalet, green shutters. Whatever she says or does to you, don't forget to sign all the paperwork and to set a possible date for the first conference with her."

She got up with a smirk on her face. I didn't understand what that meant, but I felt like the interview was over. As she walked me to the door, she told me that she hoped that we would find time to resume this conversation, because she loved comparative anthropology.

Passing exam

The cottage village was not very big, but the directions I was given were not clear. I got lost, went back to the central square and resolved to ask a small group of students for directions. When I told them that I was looking for a house with green shutters, not far from an ash tree, they looked at each other. I began to worry, but luckily, a more mature young man of about twenty-five years offered to bring me there, claiming it was nearby. He led me a few hundred yards until I could see the green shutters, then respectfully left. Fortunately, from time to time, one could come across some helpful people in this country. When I reached my destination, I shook a bell again. Nobody came, so after waiting a few moments, I rang louder. Then, taking my courage in both hands, I pushed open the door.

The room was furnished in 1970s style, which was in very poor taste, especially in an alpine chalet. Large purple and orange marbled footstools surrounded some sheepskins on the floor. A little further on, sitting behind a Formica desk with a large flat screen, a fat woman, headphones over her ears, was typing on a keyboard. I knocked a bit hard at the door, from the inside. Obviously, she couldn't hear anything, so I got a little closer. More than lush, the woman revealed halfway, in her vast cleavage, an enormous chest. Taking advantage of the fact that her attention was entirely focused on her screen, I couldn't help but look down at these milky, adipose and throbbing globes, which seemed ready to overflow out of their bodice. I painfully detached my gaze from them, got even closer and, in a voice loud enough to be heard, I said :

“Hey ! Good afternoon !”

The woman jumped a little, saw me, straightened up, took off the helmet she had on her ears and told me :

“Sorry, I was listening to music.”

She was staring at me head-on, like she was inspecting me. What she saw seemed to suit her and it was in a warm tone that she asked me :

“You're the new one ?”

“Uh... Yes.”

“Affoué e-mailed me everything in the last half hour. You took the time to visit campus ? or to hang out a little ?”

“I... I'm sorry,” I said, “but...”

She gave me a knowing glance and stopped me:

“You did well. You have to take the time to live, haven't you ?”

I approved with my eyes, without daring to say that I got lost for such a small distance.

“You might have taken the opportunity to take a look at the legs of our young students ?”

“Oh no ! no !” I protested. “Sure not !”

She interrupted me, again, to reassure me :

“I was just saying it as a joke. Besides, there's nothing wrong with looking at beautiful things.”

She winked at me and readjusted her chest a little in her blouse. My gaze was inevitably drawn to this taut, briefly shaken flesh. As she raised her eyes to the sky, she made it clear that she was

perfectly aware of where my eyes had landed, but her benevolent smile told me that she saw nothing offensive there.

She pulled out a piece of pink tongue, slowly moistened her finger with it, and turned a few pages.

“Your little delay has allowed me to make the necessary preparations for your integration,” she told me. “Affoué undoubtedly explained to you the essential : WA, seniority at one year, GS at five, half-time trial at seven hundred and fifty, full at one thousand eight hundred, guaranteed under the fifteen, progression deducted. If you want to check the details before signing.”

She was handing me a thick register.

I took it and opened it. It was like a hundred-page rule book. I looked at it, worried, but she told me she'd send me a copy on my flashphone and I could read it quietly. As I was hesitating, she added :

“You may want to know more before you sign. Want to go deeper into it?”

I was nodding my head. She brought her hand closer to her chest, as if to adjust it again. But this time, her hand remained resting on her cleavage, immobile at first, soon slightly caressing. Her mouth opened to let a sigh pass through:

“If you're interested, we can dive deeper into it.”

I was not dreaming, this woman was stroking her cleavage in front of me. She was looking me straight in the eyes with total and assumed shamelessness. She took a deep breath of air, which swelled her chest even more, and asked me again :

“Are you interested ?”

I dared not answer. But my gaze was irresistibly drawn to the sight of her wandering hand on her own chest. She slowly opened the zipper of her bodice. I looked left and right, no one was there. Her cleavage was widening. She pushed two fingers into her mouth, pulled them out and slid them between her breasts. Which pulled the zipper down again. Petrified, I could hardly breathe. She gave me a childish, vicious little pout, which I would have never thought possible with such a big mouth.

“I think I'm going to love taking care of your little sign-up formalities,” she whispered to me as she zipped down again. The inevitable happened : her two huge breasts popped out. She weighed them for a moment, looking me straight in the eye. Then, squeezing her two nipples between her thumbs and forefingers, she held them out to me through her desk. I moved backwards a little, but already I was not in complete control of myself. I felt a compelling erection tightening my pants. She saw my discomfort and desire. In a soft, wet voice, she told me :

“Don't be afraid. We're just gonna have fun. Like this, watch.”

And, to show me the example, she took out a big pink tongue and slowly licked the huge breast she had put in her mouth. I didn't dare to move, but my breathing quickened. She got up, walked around her desk and approached me, chest forward. I noticed that her ass and her huge thighs were topped by a miniskirt that hardly masked anything. I remained seated and let her come close to me. My hands rested naturally on her hips and my face was just at the height of her breasts.

“Taste-me !” she ordered.

Never mind, I wanted it too much. I licked and sucked what she presented to me, while she let out a few satisfied grunts.

“You can't stay like this,” she said, “you're gonna get hurt.”

In two expert gestures, she unleashed my sex, which suddenly came out of its tissue strait-jacket. She stroked my glans, then whispered to my ear : “You, you’re going to make me come.” Without ceasing to caress me, she made me get up and undressed me slowly. Then she pushed me, towards her big beanbags. I slumped halfway down on the sheepskins on the floor. She stood up in front of me, a hand stuck under her skirt, under her panties, on her sex. She pressed a bell. She took off her panties, slowly, caressing her broad thighs. She got down on all fours, right next to me, her skirt up, her ass offered. She opened her mouth and made a small round pout from which she made her tongue come in and out, then she squeezed her buttocks making small butt jerks. She told me languidly :

“Choose, you want to fuck me from the front or the back?”

She added with greed : “I have rang. Gavriíl’s coming. He’ll take care of the other side.”

At these words, I do see a young, athletic man with curly black hair, an angel’s face but a totally wild smile. He finished taking off his shirt and said in a sharp voice : “So, my little loukoum, you’ve found yourself a new cock ? ”

The secretary was violently caressing her sex and ass, while underneath her, her big tits were dangling. She blew towards the young man : “Yes ! I do want it !” She watched him take off his pants and, without embarrassment, grasped his penis to shake it in front of her. At this vision, my hostess stuck out her tongue wide. She turned to me and implored: “Choose quick ! Come ! ” I couldn’t take my eyes off that tongue anymore. I approached my sex, and, as soon as it was within her reach, she started licking it, then she opened her mouth wide and swallowed me at once, greedily. I closed my eyes. With her whole body jerking and squealing with pleasure, I understood that she was being fucked hard from behind.

I woke up slowly, slumped over a huge purple beanbag, still naked as a worm. The young man with curly hair had only put on little black boxer shorts. He was serving a fizzy drink. Realizing that I was awake, he brought me a drink.

“Hi,” he said to me with a friendly smile, “a little fizz to get back on your feet?”

“Uh, yes, thanks,” I answered shyly.

“I’m Gavriíl and our hostess is called Danái. We are both of Greek origin. We help each other a little. And you, the new guy, what’s your name?”

“I... I’m Sébastien.”

I sat down and got the glass. Gavriíl was so quiet that I felt strangely appeased. Fat Danái reappeared. She had wrapped her curves in a slightly transparent kimono and was carrying a tray of delicate, multicolored oriental pastries. She placed it on sheepskins and sat comfortably on a beanbag, located next to mine. Gavriíl also brought her a glass of fizz. I realized then that I was still completely naked. I started to get up to get closer to my clothes, but Gavriíl stopped me with a gesture. He opened a cupboard and pulled out some kimonos. He threw them in my direction, saying: “Choose one! You’ll look better in that than in your moldy old capitalo clothes.” I didn’t dare refuse and I put on a black kimono with silver patterns representing cranes in flight. Danái smiled at me and picked up a pastry, of which she bit a tiny bit. She gave me a tender glance. I shyly gave her back her smile and tasted a little of the fizz. It’s a sparkling, sweet drink with a strong taste of exotic fruits. Then I too took one of the pastries placed on the tray. I had

a thought for Clithène, but it was a nice thought. She hadn't held back herself. And I could understand her taste for surfers better while contemplating Gavriil's muscles.

"We mustn't forget the papers," Danái reminded us. "You didn't have time to tell me if it suits you: AT with GS at five, seniority at one year, minimum participation at 20 %?"

Put at ease, I dared answer:

"In fact, I... I just moved to your country. And I don't understand those terms."

Workers associations, entrepreneurs and *golden shares*

“See, I told you,” slipped Danái to Gavriíl. “He’s a newcomer. I saw right away that he was lost. I thought, this chick needs to be warmed up and...”

“Oh you,” Gavriíl chuckled, “You see chicks needing to be warmed up everywhere.”

“And you, you’re my little rooster,” she replied with a little pout, gulping down the rest of her pastry. “And a little professor rooster who will be very kind to do his job and explain everything to our new friend.”

Gavriíl sat down in front of me, swallowed a little of his fizz and asked:

“What do you need to know?”

“Eh... I’d just like to figure out what you mean by all those ‘WA’ and ‘GS’ and stuff...”

“I see,” Gavriíl began. “We’re gonna have to start from the very beginning. In Arcania, there are two kinds of organizations...”

“That I know,” I interrupted. “Districts, which include all the inhabitants of a place, and associations, which include only those who belong to them.”

“You see, he’s got some basics,” slid Danái.

“And do you know the different kinds of associations?” asked Gavriíl.

“Not really,” I admitted.

“Roughly speaking, an association can be a users’ association, a workers’ association (a ‘WA’), or a mixed association, which organizes a kind of power sharing between users and workers. But then, for economic, production or service activities, one most often organizes oneself in a workers’ association — a WA.”

“I’ve also heard of ‘co-op’.”

“This word ‘co-op’ comes from the old word ‘cooperative’.”

“Ah!” I was so relieved. At least that I knew.

“When we’re talking about ‘cooperative’, it’s just about the egalitarian nature of the distribution of power. Talking about an egalitarian workers’ association or a workers’ cooperative is the same thing. In a co-op, workers’ power is distributed according to the principle of one worker equals one vote. The new hire has the same voice as the founder of the company. It’s democratic, if you like. There are also egalitarian user associations, called consumer cooperatives. On the other hand, mixed associations, which mix the two, are usually not quite egalitarian. So I don’t think we can talk about mixed cooperatives...”

“And this academy?” I asked.

“Here it sucks,” Gavriíl said. “Even if students have a small role in some situations, it’s really too light to talk about a mixed association. It’s a workers’ association, a WA, and not an egalitarian WA; with GS, if you prefer. This kind of WA is almost capitalo. Their old name, which you may come across, is ‘worker’s company’. But, most often, these WA are simply called ‘com-

pany', to remind you that the founders, the 'entrepreneurs', are privileged. But in the end, the 'entrepreneurs', I call them 'exploiters', it's clearer."

"Don't listen too much to his comments," whispered Danái to me. "He's good-looking, but he's a flattener."

"Don't be a flatterer, baby. I'm a beautiful egalitarian."

"You are a sublime flattener."

"In the early days of the misarchy," Gavriíl said, "there were only co-ops. Founding non-democratic organizations seemed really shocking. It was only with the degeneration of our ideals..."

"You exaggerate," interrupted Danái. "My cousin worked like crazy for years to set up his plumbing business. If you ask him to split everything in half, as soon as he hires a worker, it's clear he'll never hire anyone."

"Well, that way there will be only self-employed workers and it will be good!" replied Gavriíl.

"Everyone doesn't want to set up their own business. And to keep the companies that do business from getting bigger would be completely idiotic. By the way, you're glad you got a job at Affoué's academy. She went through a lot to set up her academy and, with your little ass that just arrived, you'd like to have the same share as her. Besides, she's the star. On your own, you'd hardly have any students."

"Just wait until I publish my book! Then you'll see who the star is!"

"I know you're the best, honey," cajoled Danái, "but as long as I'm the only one who knows it..."

Gavriíl helped himself to more fuzz, with a bit of impatience in his arm.

"I'll explain, sweetie," Danái told me, "since pretty boy is sulking. In the beginning, the theorists wanted to abolish management and give all the power to the workers, on a strictly egalitarian basis. But, as you can imagine, that didn't really encourage the creation of companies. Not everyone is willing to work hard to build a business, especially if you have to share it as soon as you hire someone. The realists won out very quickly. For them, it was necessary to encourage people to create their own structures, to go into production and trade. And setting up an economic organization involves effort, risks... It was dissuasive and unfair to give as much weight to the worker who had just joined the organization as to the one who founded the organization and set it up, sometimes after years of work. That is why associations were founded, alongside co-operatives, which can deviate from democratic principles and favor the founders. Advocates of pure democracy have called them 'companies'. At first, it was pejorative, in memory of the old capitalo word. But, well, the companies were so successful that they are now well accepted and even the word is no longer pejorative. Especially since a company always ends up becoming a co-op: the founders' shares have a time limit; after ten years, they start to decrease; and after twenty years, there's nothing left. That's why the name 'workers' association', or WA, is nowadays more widely used than the word 'company'. There are only a few flatteners, like our friend the beautiful Gavriíl, who remain uncompromising."

Before Gavriíl had time to reply, she added:

"But that's what makes him so attractive!"

And she gave him a big, noisy kiss, wildly fluttering her long eyelashes. This had the effect of blocking any comeback from him. Fat Danái's explanations reassured me. So they had companies, too. I slowly swallowed my fuzz.

“By the way,” said Danái, “the proof that a ‘company’ can work is that almost everyone here votes for Affoué to be tribune!

“Excuse me,” I interrupted, “but I don’t get it anymore. I thought I understood that this academy was Affoué Kouad’s company. But the workers vote?”

”Of course! We’re not some capitalos!”

“Humph,” grumbled Gavriíl, “So you say! The oppressed workers submit to the bosses, as in the old days of capitalism.”

“You lost me,” I confessed, confused.

“A ‘boss’”, Danái told me. “It’s an old capitalo word. If pretty boy uses it, it’s a way of speaking badly of Affoué.”

“It’s just the truth. With her GS, she’s definitely the boss.”

“A ‘GS’?” I asked. “What is it?”

“A ‘GS’ or ‘*golden share*’,” explained Danái, “is a special, privileged share reserved for the founders of the company and which gives them preferential voting rights. The founder can vote more than other workers at general meetings.”

“And a GS is so strong in small businesses,” Gavriíl noted, “that the boss has all the power. So economic democracy is a big joke.”

“The maximum *golden share* that can be shared between the founders of a company is strong,” Danái acknowledged. “Maybe we should reduce it.”

“Ah! You have to admit that this stinks!” triumphed Gavriíl. “You see, Sébastien, just remember that. In business, there’s no equality and no freedom! Otherwise, for the details, it’s a little complicated to explain and I imagine you don’t care at all.”

“Wait, no, I...” I started.

“Anyway, we do have to explain it to you before you join,” interrupted Danái. “Otherwise you won’t even know what you’re signing up for. The *golden share*, or GS, is the proportion of voting rights granted to the founders of a company. The maximum GS that can be shared by the founders is equal to ten, divided by the sum of ten and the number of non-founding workers.”

I looked at her; a little lost. She took a pen and a sheet of paper on which she wrote: $10/(10 + x)$. Then she explained:

“ ‘x’ is the number of workers hired by the founders. For example, if the founder did not hire any other workers, x is zero. In this case, $10/(10 + x)$ gives $10/(10 + 0)$, either $10/10$, or 1, or 100 % of the votes. It is rather logical : if the founder is the only member, he has all the votes. If he hires an employee, it gives $10/(10 + 1)$, or $10/11$, or 0,9 of the total votes, 90 % if you prefer. This means that a founder who hires an employee can reserve a *golden share of* 90 % of the votes. In other words, he or she is guaranteed to remain the boss. If he hires two, his maximum GS will be $10/12$, i.e. 84 %, and so on. The switchover is done with ten workers. If he hires ten workers, $10/(10 + 10)$, that makes $10/20$, or 0.5, or 50 % of the votes. If more than ten workers are hired, it becomes a minority in terms of votes. But if he is a little charismatic, that does not change anything. With twenty employees, his GS is still $10/30$, i.e. 33 % of the votes alone. It takes quite a coalition of workers to dethrone him. All it takes is for him to pay a minimum of attention to keep his place as boss. Moreover, in small paternalistic clubs, workers are often hyper-legitimist.”

“I’m telling you,” Gavriíl intervened, “the suppression of the patronage is not for tomorrow.”

“Obviously,” Danái said, “in an association of a thousand workers, his GS is now only 1 %. But, if you think about it, it’s still not bad. And many founders make do with a lower GS.”

“And here ?” I asked.

“We are about 20 workers,” explained Danái. “Affoué’s GS is five. Her GS is $5/(x + 5)$. As there are twenty of us, that makes $5/(20 + 5)$, or $5/25$, or $1/5$, or 20 % of the votes. The twenty workers share the remaining 80 % of the votes. That makes 4 % per head. With you, if you stay, there will be twenty-one of us and the calculations will be a little more complicated.”

“Well, if you’re gonna be here for a while,” specified Gavriil. “Because, anyway, you don’t vote immediately ! It’s the exclusion of occasional comrades and precarious workers ! At the academy, you need one year of seniority to vote. And, again, you can feel lucky about it! In some companies, they can demand a progressive acquisition with the gradual takeover of the CoDeW.”

“OK, OKAY. But that’s not the case here, so who cares? So ? Do you understand now when they tell you that we’re a company with GS at five and one year of seniority ?”

“Yes,” I said, focused. “If one day I have a year’s seniority, I could vote, with the same vote as each of you. While Affoué Kouad will have a greater voice.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Gavriil. “It’s a shame. On her own, she votes like five workers ! And, again, we’re doing well. She could have chosen to get twice as much power !”

“We could lower the maximum GS in the fundamentals,” Danái acknowledged. “In any case, the maximum GS coefficient is always hyper debated : some want to increase it, others want to decrease it... For the moment, so that you understand, you should know that after ten years, the coefficient of a GS is reduced by one per year, until the founder’s vote becomes the same as that of any employee. And if you want to know everything, the Kouad academy was founded seven years ago. In three years, Affoué’s share will start to decline.”

“To be complete,” added Gavriil, “it would still be necessary to explain to you the share of the users.”

“What’s that ?”

“Students also participate in the management of the academy. Even if they are not given much weight here, they still have their say. In mixed associations, users are an important counterweight. A bit like in supermarkets, where regular customers are cooperating.”

“You know,” I said, “in France, in a supermarket, you just go shopping.”

“We also have this kind of shop in Arcania,” explained Gavriil, “but it’s rarer. To put it simply, let’s say that the division of votes between users and workers varies according to the associations. The fundamentals only intervene to break the economic domination and dominant positions that are too obvious. For example, when an association has a local monopoly on a basic good, such as water or the Internet, it automatically becomes a user district. And, in a district, the inhabitants, the users if you like, are always predominant. When piped water systems were introduced in the XVIIIth century, water management became a district affair. For domestic electricity too, it is most often managed by districts. Simply put, with modern techniques of generating electricity by building or by neighborhood, the districts are getting smaller and smaller as they are split up. Workers in a district cannot represent more than a quarter of the voting rights at assemblies. And, of course, in districts of authority, such as the police or the Central Fund, workers have only an advisory role. It is the inhabitants who have all the decision-making powers. You see, the principle of ‘all power to the workers’ is undergoing a lot of serious exceptions !”

“You still forget the essential,” I objected, “the power of the investors ! No one will want to put a penny into a business if they don’t have the power to decide what will be done with their money.”

“Power to the investors?” intervened Danái, “as in a capitalist regime? But certainly not ! In the misarchy, capital contributors have never had any voting rights, neither in cooperatives, nor in companies, nor in districts ! Unless they are also workers, of course.”

“But it must be impossible to raise funds ! Besides, whoever puts money into a business becomes an owner of this business. He should be able to decide what to do with his goods !”

“Wow ! But what is he saying ?” said a frightened Gavríil, in the direction of Danái.

“Nothing, it’s nothing,” Danái calmed him down immediately. “He’s a newcomer, be cool. We’re going to have to give him a big lecture on the place of investors, on workers’ property rights, on the value of companies and, above all, on the CoDeW.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” I confessed.

“But don’t worry, darling,” Danái assured me, “your assets are not committed beyond your lump-sum contribution on salary. And, when you were told a salary of seven hundred and fifty monthly, that was net of compulsory participation. So it’s only a bonus. You can rest assured. To sign, my darling, sincerely, you only need to know the right to vote you’ll have and your net salary payable. We’ll explain the rest another time, ok ?”

I had obviously touched on a sensitive point. There must be some power that remains in the hands of the owner of the business, but they did not dare to tell me about it.

Danáí went back to her computer screen. She asked me :

“So, Sébastien, Affoué is offering you a part-time trial, which is still an hour a week, plus research. She said to put your classes in tenth grade history and fifteen in anthropology. For seven hundred and fifty winkies net per month, minimum participation paid... Honestly, between us, for level ten-fifteen, it’s not much. Finally, if it works, in two months’ time, she’ll offer you a full-time job at 1,800 net winkies. The advantage of being in a company is that it’s a guaranteed salary, even if you have less than fifteen students. If you have more, you get a bonus, which makes sense since the funding district estimates it according to the number of students and the level taught.”

“Here, I can’t grumble too much,” Gavríil noted. “These are the terms of the collective agreement I signed myself.”

“A collective agreement ?”

“Yes,” explained Gavríil, “it is an agreement signed by the elected union representatives and the management board. It sets out the broad outlines of pay and working conditions. You don’t know about this either, you capitalos?”

“We do ! Trade unions, elected staff representatives, collective agreement : it’s just like at home ! But, with leaders elected by the staff, I don’t really see the point. The power is already in the hands of the workers, isn’t it?”

“So naive, isn’t he ?” said Gavríil when addressing Danái.

“You know,” noted Danái, “just because leaders are elected doesn’t mean they don’t have power. On the contrary, their power is all the more legitimate. It is therefore perhaps even more dangerous. It needs counter-powers. For the past two years, Gavríil has been our elected staff union representative.”

“But you elect both the management and the union representative. It’s a little curious.”

“Don’t take us for idiots,” Danái answered. “They’re not the same functions. We don’t elect the same people. Gavríil would be a catastrophic manager. It’s more like Affoué’s relatives who are elected to the board of directors. But when it comes to negotiating salary increases, Gavríil is perfect. And there’s also the commission drawn by lot.”

I stayed quiet. Their organizations were decidedly complex.

“So ?” Shook me Danái, “you’re interested ? Do you want me to send your application to the committee ?”

Cergy University would never know that I had worked overtime here without a cumulation permit. And then seven hundred and fifty winkies, that’d still make me some money. I looked at the 1970s footstools, the sheepskins on the floor, Gavríil still almost naked and Danái in a transparent kimono. This wild recruitment secretary proved that I was really at the loonies. But I remembered that I myself was in a kimono. I swallowed a sip of this sweet fuzz. I swirled it around in my mouth for a few seconds before I swallowed it. A little heavy, but not bad, not bad at all.

“Alright,” I said. “I am interested ! And I’m hoping it’ll go through with the committee.”

“Don’t worry, it’s gonna be fine,” Gavríil said.

“You will have your confirmation very soon,” assured Danái. “And for your first class... — she was looking at her computer screen- is next Monday possible for you?”

“Agreed !” I said.

Gavríil applauded. He was really handsome. He reminded me a bit of the surfer from Clisthène, but smaller and with dark hair. An idea suddenly came to me :

“I... If I get hired... For my first class... I could do invitations ?”

“Sure, of course, you can invite whoever you want, even if they are not at the level !” said Gavríil. “You’d better. In any case, the registration for all your courses is always free : the Fund pays for it.”

On the train back to the center, I felt a mixture of discomfort and anxiety. But I recovered my status as a teacher with disconcerting ease. I couldn’t wait to send out an invitation to my first class to Clisthène. I was thinking of sending one to the kid at the hotel, this Josuah, and to my lawyer, this brave Rosin : he’s a lawyer ! He, at least, might be interested. I even found, at the bottom of my bag, the number of the kind Joseon, who had given me so many explanations on the bus. I told myself that I could perhaps invite him too. That would have made four invitations ! Not bad for someone who’d just arrived. I was starting to dream of myself speaking loudly, in my professorial voice, surrounded by an audience of many passionate students, with Clisthène in the front row.

At the same time, I had absolutely no idea what I was going to tell for this first lecture. I could give them a lecture on the basics of property rights. But, here, as soon as I was saying something somewhat normal, they didn’t understand anything. I re-read the title imposed by Affoué Kouad : ‘Myths from the Overwest : omnipotence, eternal life and ownership’. With such an angle, the finer points of our legal system were likely to go way over their heads. They might even have laughed at it. I had to be prepared, I had to be ready to shut them down. The best thing would have been I learned what their ‘logic’ was in property law. They must have had a library. I’d be there all the next day if I had to.

Night had fallen. I felt ashamed, but still a little excited, remembering what I had done in that secretariat. I was hoping Clisthène would never find out. Although, maybe it’d make me look cooler in her eyes. I wonder what got into me, though.

A correspondence sent me back to the magneto and, again, I flew over Nehushtân. This flashing city interlaced with canals seemed like a living organism with visible veins, ready to swallow me as soon as I'd have come down to its ground. And Clisthène who still had not contacted me. She had said she would have flashed me. I was starting to worry, hoping nothing untoward had happened to her. With her habit of going off with anyone, she could have gotten herself into trouble.

When I got to the hotel, I was glad I ran into Josuah. He handed me my key, smiled and greeted me before moving on to the next guests. I felt strangely rejected. I thought I would have liked to have a bowl of soup with him. I went out looking for a restaurant or something. After wandering around a bit randomly, I stopped, in shock : a flashing shop window surrounded by drawings of banknotes announced : 'Restaurant Français'. I walked straight towards it.

Capitalism and blue ties

The waiter was dressed as a Parisian with a beret, waistcoat and red scarf. On the walls, pictures of the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe were hung everywhere. It was a bit ridiculous, but wrought iron bistro tables were acceptable copies. I let myself get set up at a table. The waiter with the beret brought me the menu. I spotted that they offered a 'bœuf bourguignon with its gratin dauphinois'. Obviously, these two dishes didn't go together at all, but a 'bœuf bourguignon'! And a 'gratin dauphinois'! I was salivating. I added half a bottle of Saint-Joseph's wine, displayed at the price of a Romance-Conti, but who cared! The simple fact to order in a confident voice, insisting on proper pronunciation, was a real pleasure.

I took advantage of the wait to inspect the other customers. On my left, around a table, a family in marquis and marquise clothes (all steeper than each other, with their mouths in a hen's eye) was eating without speaking. A little further on, a group of young people was seated around mugs of beer. They were dressed in an offbeat outfit. Their shaved hair, leather jackets and big rangers could make you think of skins. But their jackets were strangely covered with pins in the shape of euros and dollars and, above all, they were wearing white shirts with a patch on the pocket and an electric blue tie. Even though I only looked at them very discreetly, in the corner, I had the impression that they'd spotted me too. They were giving me oblique glances. I ended up giving them a polite salute with my gaze, just in case. Finally, one of them got up and walked towards me. He was a muscular guy at least six feet tall, with a perfectly shaved head and a perfect triple knot tie. He had absurd banknote tattoos all around his neck. He sat skullishly in front of me and, in a dry tone of voice, asked me with a very correct, although not perfect, French accent :

"So colleague, blue tie enthusiast?"

"Uh...", I said amazed, "yes... I do wear them sometimes."

"Electric blue ?"

"I... I don't know."

"Anyway, you got nothing against blue ties?"

"Oh no, nothing!" I assured him being defensive.

"Do you know what that means at least?"

"Uh... Does that mean anything?"

"That's what I thought. You don't belong here, you! We heard you ordering. And, with your accent, we thought maybe you were from France."

"Actually, yes! I... I'm French! I just got here."

"How formidable! A Frenchman!" He exclaimed.

He turned to the other members of his group and gave them a strong affirmative sign. In a tone of sudden fraternal friendship, he explained :

"Here, we love France. The luxury, the easy women, the great perfumes!"

He was a bit eccentric, but for once I met someone who seemed to appreciate my country, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of relief. He proudly showed me his currency tattoos and

invited me to join them at their table. I told myself that it will be nice to have some company, especially since, under his grated leather jacket and his skin-like appearance, he was still wearing a tie, which was reassuring. I waved to the waiter to let him know that I was changing places.

When I got to the table, everyone introduced themselves. The tall guy who had approached me seemed to be their leader. He told me that his friends called him Scrooge, and that he had chosen this war name after reading *Scrooge McDuck – Picsou*, in French. He explained to me that he was the classiest of superheroes, and had struck his heart. There was also a little scrappy, twitchy little guy who had chosen Sark as his nickname – in honor of our former president, the dynamic Sarkozy. A fat man with glasses, a scar on his chin and seriously damaged teeth, was vigorously squeezing my hand : ‘Garnier, they call me Garnier.’ He added with a wink: ‘Because I’m worth it.’ A tall, skinny guy said he preferred to be called ‘Tex’. He explained to me that the Blue Ties had several branches and that he was part of the United States fan club, but that it was clear that he respected the *Froggies*, *no problem*. The great Scrooge nodded his head and told me : ‘Here, everybody loves France, but we also love the United States and all of Western Europe. And Japan... ! And Australia ! And lots of others !’ He got up, held up his beer mug and said loudly : ‘Long live France, long live the States ! Long live NATO and OECD ! And long live the Blue Ties !’ The waiter was waving at him to keep his voice down. Scrooge gave him a friendly nod of acquiescence and sat down. I introduced myself in turn :

“Sébastien Debourg, French, law professor.”

“So you’re a real Frenchman,” Sark asked me, with a twinkle in his eye. “Membership at birth, cultural fusion, and all that?”

“Exactly!” I confirmed.

“A country of adventurers, great captains !” went on Scrooge, “where it is still possible with a few suitcases of money to build up an empire, to lead thousands of workers and guide them to prosperity ! The country of Bolloré, with its one hundred thousand hectares of palm trees and rubber trees in Africa and Asia, with its dozens of African ports. A man who can destroy entire ecosystems, just like that, to increase his fortune.”

“Mister Bolloré is also an environmentalist,” I added. “With his money, he is also the man who covered Paris with small electric cars we call Autolib’.”

“And he also has a sixty-five meter long luxury yacht!” added Sark, stars in his eyes. “And he even lent it to his friend, the former supreme leader of France, President Sarkozy.”

“In France, we just say president,” I clarified.

“And the L’Oréal saga,” intervened the fat Garnier through his blackened teeth. “For me, it’s the most beautiful story.”

“Do you really know the history of L’Oréal?” I asked, a little surprised.

“Of course,” he was getting all full of himself, “that’s my specialty. I read all about it. I bet I could teach you!”

“Oh no! He’s not going to do it all over again!” grumbled the big Tex.

“Let him do it,” let go of Scrooge. “You’ll find the Blue Ties know what they’re talking about. Go ahead, Garnier, show him you’re worth it!”

“Uh well,” started Garnier, “it began with Eugene Schueller, a great hair paint and cheap shampoo merchant! He was the first to sell jars of liquid grease to put on the skin to protect against the sun. He called it ‘sun amber’ and he launched the thing just one year before the first paid holidays. And, when white-washed factory workers invaded the beaches, beware the sunburns ! A fortune for the oil can salesman. He had it all forecast! He could see the future. Besides, at

that time, no one could foresee that Hitler's military victories would bring him to Paris. And yet Schueller was already financing the Hood and supporting racist far-right movements."

"That, it's less glorious!" I said, shocked.

To my great relief, Scrooge intervened firmly :

"Nazis were monsters! The worst ones the Earth ever wore. Watch your mouth, Garnier! It sounds like you're trivializing this."

"Sure, sure," retreated Garnier, "nobody likes the Nazis. And you know I don't either, Scrooge. No one loves liberties more than I do."

"Long live the free individual!" exclaimed Sark.

"Long live the elections, democracy and human rights!" said Tex.

Phew! For a moment, I had thought these people might have some kind of right-wing extremist connection. I was reassured.

"If I admire Schueller," Garnier explained, "it's not for his support of racist and authoritarian movements. Those things disgust me as much as you do. What I like is his freedom. From the top of his empire, he could do anything he wanted ! And he knew how to preserve his freedom : always a step ahead! The same goes for André Bettencourt, his son-in-law and successor. When it was time, he called the youth to denounce the 'anti-France' and he published anti-Semitic stuff. But as soon as he was sure that the Germans were going to lose the war, he began to change his mind. Like Schueller, he could feel the spirit of his time! For the Nazis when it's useful to be, for the Resistance when it becomes necessary. With his Vichyist friends François Mitterrand and François Dalle, he was even decorated for acts of resistance. So we can't say anything. Besides, Mitterrand, Dalle and Bettencourt got together to protect old Schueller who was in danger of being imprisoned at the Liberation, for his support to the Vichyist authorities. Of the three friends, Dalle took over the management of L'Oréal, Mitterrand may have had a small management position in one of the group's companies but, afterwards, he went into politics. And Bettencourt got his fortune back, indirectly: he married Liliane, the Schueller daughter, the heiress. Then he became mayor, deputy, senator and minister! The son-in-law of Hitler's extremely wealthy admirer, the overactive little petainist, became a great democratic politician. World-class! Meanwhile, François Dalle ran the shop. And Mitterrand became president."

"A great team of great captains," Scrooge admitted. "The new chivalry!"

"In the United States," confirmed Tex, "millions of fans cover themselves with L'Oréal creams and shampoos. And, all over the world, tens of thousands of subjugated workers are totally subservient to the firm. I recognize that they are world-class, your *Frenchies*. Total respect!"

"In Misarchy," Garnier insisted, "such leaders would have been belittled, humiliated, plundered. The workers would have run the empire and taken themselves for the masters. In France, you, you know how to recognize the value of the great. And, even if they were racist and petainist, you know how to forget their weaknesses, to value what makes them great. You see beauty and admire strength."

"In France, everyone who makes a success of their life has a Rolex!" bid Sark.

"At your place, 'We don't mix the tea towels and napkins' ", recited Scrooge. "Here, the shabby and mediocre think themselves equal to the sublime."

"That's true," I said with some pride, "that my country has always honored its great men."

"To conclude," Garnier resumed, "André le Bel is dead. But, well surrounded, his wife Liliane continues to lead skillfully..."

"Uh..." I remarked, "she's severely diminished and recently lost the reins of her empire."

“How sad! But what about the empire?”

“Don’t worry, her daughter took over some direction. And, already, one of Andre’s grandsons is getting ready to assume his responsibilities.”

“Fantastic !” exclaimed Garnier relieved. “As in the Middle Ages, fiefdoms were passed on and enlarged from generation to generation, from lord to lord. What an example! To say that it would be enough to respect a few simple principles, such as freedom of trade and industry, respect for the laws of the market, heritage... And, in Arcania too, I am sure, we would see such dynasties appear. Alas, with our supposedly modern, progressive rules, we have nothing comparable. I am ashamed of Arcania. You Frenchmen have managed to preserve the glorious and virile adventure of the conquering nobility.”

“I admit, I hadn’t thought of it that way,” I said. “There’s breath, there’s epic. It is often necessary to travel to better understand the beauty of one’s own country.”

“When I think,” Scrooge told me with emotion, “that our droolers and misarchist historians spit on your exceptional humans and their noble lineage. I’m pissed off. Honestly, Sébastien -he put his hand on his heart-, I’m really pissed!”

“Thanks,” I said, grateful.

“The more impressive, for us,” Scrooge resumed, “is your ‘fraternity’. That’s one of the reasons why, among the Blue Ties, we chose France. This fraternity that unites the greats is the most beautiful thing. They say that you have schools that prepare you for this, from childhood. Schools where all those who are destined to become leaders go, who learn the art of leadership and the art of command. They say that’s where your great leaders learn to help each other, to love each other like brothers. They remain fraternal beyond their future professions, whether they run businesses or run the state. André Bettencourt, François Dalle and François Mitterrand, united by their activism in the same networks, like three brothers. And your Sarkozy, financed by Liliane and her great friend Bolloré. And François Pinault, so close to Chirac, then to François Hollande... And this dynamic Macron, already totally devoted to the richest as an investment banker when he was still very young. Better than a man of conviction, a man of vocation. Your elites know what mutual aid and solidarity means. When I think of the grotesque mix between the weak and the powerful, the rich and the poor that we are forced to make. No true brotherhood can come out of it.”

“France is all very well,” Tex noted, “but you should see the United States. The links between the Bush clan and Halliburton, the generosity of the billionaires who give so much to help election campaigns. The superb founders of Hillary Clinton and, above all, Donald the Triumphant and his team of supermanagers. For once, the great knights of finance did not need to ally themselves with powerful politicians to govern. They have directly conquered supreme power, by themselves and for themselves. The seventeen members of the first Trump government alone owned as much as one-third of the country’s population, more than a hundred million people. Only the people of the United States are mature enough to give political power directly to those who are already economically stronger.”

“Sure, that’s impressive,” recognized little Sark in his chair. “But the United States doesn’t have the ‘Grandes Ecoles’! A good French leader must go to the state school, the army school and the school of money. Isn’t it ?” He asked me.

“Not the three of them, though,” I said. “It is true that our greatest leaders are either from ‘HEC’, a business school, a school of money if you like, or the ‘ENA’, which is the school of high administration, the school of state power — well, let’s say the school of public power. They

sometimes do both. Other leaders also come from 'Polytechnique', which is a military school, but which is above all a place where you learn to master the power of science and numbers. Some go to Polytechnique and the ENA."

"The United States also has big, expensive universities," protested Tex, "Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Stanford... The children of the rich and powerful mix there, get drunk and have sex together. They learn to be in solidarity, to love each other!"

"Still, the selection there works less well than in France. Some of the leaders are vulgar," Sark protested. "Reagan, for example, an actor, and George W. Bush, an alcoholic unable to join the university elite."

"Reagan was only an ad and the fortune of the Bush clan is enough to demonstrate the greatness of this family!" retorted Tex. "And if I tell you Google, Microsoft, Apple, Facebook ! After Rockefeller, Ford, Coca-Cola and Exxon Mobil, the United States knew how to renew themselves! Thanks to computers, they have generated some of the greatest economic dominations on the planet. That's sublime!"

"Easy enough," Sark resumed, "the United States is five times more populated than France. They are five times more likely to have great men and can create empires five times bigger."

"Stop to argue," came down hard on Scrooge. "The Blue Ties are like the great fortunes of the planet : they are united ! The French section admires the strength and financial power wherever it comes from. Our South Korean friends can boast of their *chaebols* : Samsung, Hyundai, LG — these words alone make your mouth water. Germans, Indians, Spaniards, English... all have so many great men! A Mexican, Carlos Slim Helú, is regularly ranked first conqueror of wealths! And, what about Hong Kong's Li Ka-shing, who took eight hundred and sixty million dollars in dividends in 2012 alone! Glory to them all and to the laws that promote greatness!"

They all swallowed a big gulp of beer.

"And long live France and its croissants !" said Garnier, raising his mug of beer and looking Tex in the eye.

"Long live France and its croissants !" repeated Tex, conciliatory, toasting noisily.

They ordered more beer for more toast and I followed the movement. The presence of these lovers of my beautiful country was doing me a lot of good. They finally brought us food. My 'bœuf bourguignon' had been cooked in water, with olives, and the 'gratin dauphinois' was mixed with peas and bacon. And all this had to be sprinkled with beer, my little bottle of St. Joseph having been totally forgotten. But these little inconveniences were quickly digested, so communicative was the good mood of these francophiles. We celebrated, successively, the sausage, 'Jean-Yves Haberer, Jean-Marie Messier and the high rollers of the Roaring Twenties', Burgundy, its wine and its snails, Joan of Arc, 'Xavier Niel and Michel-Édouard Leclerc, the knights of low cost and low wages', the freedom of enterprise and Napoleon. We toasted to the 'proud fighters of Total, to their victories, from Gabon to Cameroon, from Burma to Iran!'. Then, while laughing, we decided to toast to all the shabby and all the defeated : to the farm workers of Africa ; to the AZF factory burst morons and the oil intoxicated men of Erika ; to the Goodyear who will be less showing off in prison ; to the sniveling laid-off workers of Molex ; to the trainee cashiers of the Leclerc, not even paid ; 'to all the obedient little soldiers who make the greatness of their generals' ; 'to all the poodles who obey, wagging their tail'.

I was on my third pint and not really used to it. Scrooge had to shake me up to make me realize that my flashphone was ringing. It was Clithène! I was waving at my new friends to

shut up. I shook myself up, tried to stand up to look good in front of the camera and pressed the button to accept the flash.

Clisthène appeared, more beautiful and smiling than ever, in her flowered dress, her hair in the wind, a towel on her shoulder. In the background, the beach and the sea could be seen.

“Hello Loco!” she tossed me. “Wow, what a change in look! Do you join us? I’m with friends! We’re going skinny-dipping.”

I was pitching a little and trying to get my head together.

“To come? I... Yes, sure!”

I saw Scrooge and Sark laughing and waving at me, and telling me that they wanted to go with me.

“I... I’m with friends,” I added by bulging my torso a bit. May I bring them along?”

“Sure, it’s cool!” Clisthène told me. “Can you introduce them to me?”

I rotated the flashphone to offer a panoramic view of my new companions and I faced the camera with a conquering smile. Clisthène looked funny.

“Did you see?” she asked me. “They’re Blue Ties...”

“Yes, of course!”

“Do you know what Blue Ties are?”

“Friends of France,” I said proudly.

“But come on, Sébastien, they’re capitalos.”

“These are my friends! My friends!” I said with the soaked firmness of a pub regular.

Clisthène looked scared. She shook her head a little in denial. Then, in her serious abbess tone, she told me:

“I thought it was because you had just gotten here, you were lost, you didn’t know anything about anything. But no, of course not! Already with granny sodomite... you’re actually a capitalo, a little capitalo scum. I blinded myself.”

“But I...”

“Forget it, I’m the idiot one. The last of the idiots!”

She cut the conversation short all of a sudden.

I emptied my fourth pint, then, despite the protests and fat laughter of my new ‘friends’, I paid and left the restaurant. I staggered through the dark, sticky night trying to reach my hotel. But a canal suddenly decided to block my way. A thick stream flowed laboriously through it, taking with it the pavement and the quay. I almost lost my balance. I had to try to sit down. The paving stones wobbled in their joints full of greenish moss. They were threatening to come lose and to carry me into the cloaca that flowed at my feet. I barely managed to suck my buttocks over the edge, my legs empty. A smell of decomposition rose from the water or from my guts. My meal is shaking me to the gullet. I threw up a pasty liquid strewn with debris of meat and olives. Most of it went between my legs, directly into the canal, but my pants were heavily soiled. If even my nice new clothes were disgusting, then I had nothing left. I burst into tears trying to wipe my pants with my hand. The edge of the dock was moving treacherously and trying to get me to join my droppings. I hung on. I managed to get down on all fours and get a few meters away. The paving stones were rising towards me, irresistibly. I stuck to them to prevent them from moving and fell asleep, almost instantly.

I woke up naked, completely wrapped up in sheets that surrounded me. A violent pain twisted my head. I turned and turned around to try to escape this kind of straitjacket. My head finally emerged. I painfully opened my eyes : the light burned me, but I persevered. Little by little, shapes and contours appeared. I manage to get my arms and my torso out of these intertwined fabric ties. I took the time to massage my temples to soothe the pain. I was in a room, in a bed. A galloping giraffe was painted on the wall facing the window. Finally, I realized I was in my hotel room.

On a chair stood a djellaba in thick cotton fabric and, just next to it, on the floor, a pair of babouches. I unfolded the djellaba to inspect it. It had large white and yellow vertical stripes and was adorned with a large and useless hood. Fine calligraphy decorated the edge of the sleeves and the hood. I decided to take a shower to clear my head a little. Back in my room, putting on this djellaba seemed to me to be the only one option : all my new clothes were gone. Once dressed, I looked at the result in the mirror of my small bathroom. Clean and ironed, the clothes swore with my three-day beard, my grayish face and my deep black bags under my eyes. The pain that twisted my brain brought me back to that evening. I sat down on the bed and recalled the memory of Clithène (smiling, with the towel on her shoulder, inviting me to come and take a midnight bath), then the memory of the same one that had become irremediably brutal and had hung up on me, just after she had cast a look of deep disgust at me. She wouldn't have looked at me differently if I had been a rat tail discovered in her bowl of soup.

I went back to the bathroom to look at myself in the mirror. I disgusted myself. I went back to bed, putting my head under the pillow. A few tears came out on their own. The pain that kept rising and splitting my skull made me give up the idea of going back to sleep. I'd have to go downstairs and ask for an aspirin or whatever they have in this country. So it is in babouches, dressed only in the djellaba, that I ventured down the stairs to the reception. Josuah, the hotel waiter that I had met at the beach, held the counter.

"So Mr. Debourg," he said warmly; "rough night, isn't it?"

"Hmm," I grumbled as a greeting.

"The night watchman told me the caretakers picked you up. With your fingerprints and a call to the trackers, they soon found out where you were staying. They brought you here to finish sleeping it off. Sleeping on the road wasn't very smart, nor very comfortable, wasn't it?"

"Grhum," I punctuated slightly annoyed.

"Anyway, you look good in djellaba. The hotel rents djellabas and babouches. And I thought about it, seeing the state of your clothes... The night watchman had preferred to put them in a bag and take them down to the shed so as not to stink up the whole hotel. If it's okay with you, we have a dry cleaning service. For nine winkies, trousers-shirt-jacket-shoes, we can return them to you impeccable for tomorrow morning!"

As I hesitated a bit, he said that, if I preferred, he could go and get my plastic bag full of clothes. I hastened to accept. The case settled, Josuah resumed with a big smile :

"Given what the night watchman told me, and from the look on your face, you must have a mighty hangover!"

"I... no... I have a headache, but... I must have suffered a shock."

"If you had seen me on the day of the results of the first level of elementary!" he continued without taking my explanation seriously for a second. "I was bad too!"

I was taking an offended look: such a young boy!

“But don’t sweat it,” kept going Josuah, wrong on my reaction, “now I’ve got the way to cure that in no time! That’s the advantage of working in the hotel business,” he explained. “You learn things.”

This immature gnome, barely pubescent, was not going to start explaining me life ! But he told me to follow him with such an assurance and I was in such a state... He took me to the hotel dining room and offered me his great ‘after-party-day’ lunch, for only seven winkies. I accepted without discussion. He left for the kitchens and came back after a few minutes, carrying a large bottle of water, a bowl of beaten cottage cheese, a fresh fruit salad, a plate of cold rice without any seasoning and a glass of water with two effervescent pills sparkling in it. He told me to swallow it all without fuss. I started to eat lunch, without daring to touch the pills, which are still sparkling a little. He sat down in front of me, as he had done the day before, and asked me directly :

“So you are integrating yourself? Already partying with buddies?”

I didn’t feel like answering anything. I shut up and keep eating. If I didn’t answer anything, he’d eventually leave me alone.

“Or maybe some worries?” he slipped away with a touch of compassion.

I couldn’t help but nod softly.

“Big worries?”

He was a really nice kid. I was nodding a little harder. I even felt that it would take little for me to cry, there, shamefully, in front of him. I swallowed his pills in one gulp, without knowing what they were. He gave me an interrogative look. That was all it took for me to let go :

“A girl...” I told him. “We had a bit of a fight yesterday.”

“You have a girlfriend! Cool! How is she?”

“She is beautiful. Much younger than me. I don’t know what got into her.”

“Bah, the age gap, if you like each other...” said Josuah. “I’ve never had a girlfriend yet, but if I could choose, I’d take an old one at least 25–30 years old.

He was winking at me. I didn’t know how to respond to that. He gave me a sideways smile and asked me :

“And so what did you do to piss her off, your friend?”

“I met some people... and I don’t think she liked it too much.”

“Is she jealous?”

“No, no, that’s not it. It’s just that she didn’t seem to like the people I met at the restaurant yesterday.”

“She is hyper-possessive your girlfriend ! A real little cocoonie?”

“I... I don’t think so...” I was thinking about the surfer.

“Or maybe she knew them and they were people she had a falling out with.”

“Not either. Well, at least they didn’t seem to know her.”

“It’s weird.”

“Yes! Very weird.”

“How did they look, your types?”

“They were dressed quite differently, but no more so than most people I meet in your country. Shaved heads, military boots, but neat shirts and pretty blue ties.

“Blue ties?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Your guys, they were Blue Ties?”

“Yes, that’s what they said their names were.”

Josuah suddenly seemed pensive.

“I understand better,” he said with something more professional, less warm in his voice.

“Understand better what? What’s so horrible about them? They are the first people I meet who know and appreciate France. You’re not allowed to like France in your misarchy?”

“Sure, you are,” assured Josuah. “Everyone does and thinks what they want.”

And, as if to conclude before leaving, he added :

“Anyway, you know, I, for one, don’t really know who the Blue Ties are. That’s just what I’ve been told. And you probably know them better than I do...”

He was getting up.

“But I don’t know them!” I said vehemently. “I can’t know everything, can I! I’ve only been in your country for five days!”

Josuah seemed to be loosening up a bit. He was sitting back down and said :

“Obviously... maybe you weren’t paying attention. Maybe you didn’t even discuss politics with them.”

“A little, though,” I admitted.

“And haven’t you been shocked? I’m just saying, ‘cause I hear they’re super-capitalos. At least that’s what they say.”

“To me, they didn’t say anything shocking,” I assured him. “They admire great achievements, great talent, just like everyone else. And they know the great men of my country well.”

“Me, honestly, what I hear about Blue Ties is that they’re really serious extremists.”

“They did seem politically correct to me. They assured me they liked elections, human rights...”

“Ah really? That’s weird. Because, as far as I know, they think only the very rich can run the society. So human rights, the same for everyone and everything, doesn’t seem to be their thing. Or just for decoration. They say that if they were allowed to do that, workers would be expropriated from their companies. And the residents would be expropriated from their homes. And the Central Fund would be responsible for giving money to those who have the most and taking it from the poor.”

“True, when you put it like that, it can be shocking,” I conceded.

“And I was also told that the Blue Ties would like to have a leader who would only be elected once every four or five years and who could do whatever he wanted in the meantime. That way, he could help the bosses get stronger, quietly, for years to come. And he would be the head of all the districts in all of Arcania. Besides, all the districts would be grouped into one district, and we wouldn’t even be allowed to split up. I’m not sure they’d go that far, though.”

I didn’t really know what to say anymore. I knew that our banks charge every cash withdrawal to people without cheque books or credit cards, who are also the poorest. While withdrawals are free for others. Not to mention all the money taken out in the event of non-payment, bank bans and other problems that are not really problems of the rich. It also occurred to me that the richer you are, the better you can invest your money, and the more it earns. And it’s also hard to deny that the business community has the ear of our presidents. I remember that indeed, with these Blue Ties, we toasted in honour of some of France’s great entrepreneurs. And, with the help of beer, we may have derailed a little. Perhaps it was that sort of thing that displeased Clithène. On the other hand, if we level the playing field, what will be left of the greatness, of the dream? I’m trying to make a point in this direction :

“Still,” I said to Josuah, “a few great individuals, dynamic and powerful, at the head of industrial or financial empires, that gives perspectives. It proves to everyone that anything is possible. If you don’t have people on top, who are out of the ordinary, you won’t be able to dream much.”

“We have a lot of dreamy stars. If that’s what you’re interested in, the hotel has subscribed to something that you should enjoy, about the lives of stars and people.”

He rummaged through a pile from which he took out a glossy magazine covered with photos, which reminded me a little of *Gala* or *Closer*. It detailed the luxurious and private lives of famous misarchists. There were stars from the world of music and sport, a tuning champion in front of her apple-green car with a body covered with small eye-shaped headlights, a muscular actor with a deep gaze, a cook who proudly posed with a big gold necklace in front of a table covered with pies of various shapes, a comic book author with his mom and dad... I lingered a bit on the photo of a woman painter, brushes in hand, caught kissing what seemed to be her male model, completely naked.

“I hardly ever read it,” Josuah told me, “but in this issue there’s a great interview with Chaggy, the king of trumpet-boogie. I really like it.”

I told myself that indeed, these celebrities can make you dream. They have hierarchies, but they are hierarchies of sport, of art... The admiration so common for great patrons or great heads of state is perhaps not the most democratic, nor the most healthy, of fascinations. I also remember thinking for a moment that those Blue Ties were a bit fascist. They reassured me, of course. But I should have known better. They admired strength and greatness, wherever it came from, a little as a reflex. And they showed a certain contempt for others. This valuing at the top and denigrating at the bottom, perhaps it has something to do with fascism. Of course, being crushed by trade is not the same thing as being crushed by the threat of a militia. You mustn’t mix everything up. Anyway, I may have been a little hasty in sympathizing with those Blue Ties. As for myself, I said to Josuah :

“I... I understand Clisthène better. I, too, love freedom and equality ! I’m not the fascist, the capitalo she thinks I am. And I was so lonely last night. These are the first people who asked me for a drink... And, besides, they loved France. I didn’t really care who they were...”

“It’s not to me you should say all this,” whispered Josuah, sympathetic.

“...”

“And if I can give you some advice, you should change your look a little, too.”

“But the djellaba, it wasn’t me who...”

“No, I mean, your clothes that we’re gonna wash for you. Honestly, I don’t know where you found them, but that’s definitely not where I told you to go. All they’re missing is the color of the tie.”

“But those Blue Ties had military shoes, leather jackets... My clothes look nothing like that !”

“You have stumbled upon some young people. The old capitalos would have loved your look. You could undermine yourself a little bit cooler, especially since your girlfriend’s young. Want me to show you again where the store I pointed you to is?”

I took out my flashphone and checked. The cross from the night before was still there and I showed it to Josuah.

“That’s it,” he confirmed.

I nodded my head, thoughtfully.

“Come on, sir, don’t worry about it. She’s just a little pissed off at you, but, uh, when she finds out, she’ll forgive you.”

“Oh that’s not sure at all,” I said, remembering my Clithène as a sadistic high priestess.

“Why not ?”

“She is more of a punishing kind of girl,” I replied with half a smile.

I thought that if she agreed to punish me, she might also agree to forgive me. The idea makes me feel better. Josuah is leaving to take care of some other clients who just came in.

I took this opportunity to write to Clithène. I told her sincerely how sorry I was and, when in doubt, I put a good layer on all the horrors of savage capitalism, to show her how open I was. I told her that I did not understand what the Blue Ties were, that I was still very lost in her country. I went so far as to say a little bad about France. I was hoping she would understand me. I took this opportunity to tell her that I was going to give a lecture at the Kouad academy. With the title that Affoué had imposed on me, which I was also giving her, it was certainly not a reference point for Blue Ties. I hoped it would help me clear my name a bit. I was re-reading it carefully. I didn’t want it to be maudlin. I was just asking her to agree to have a drink with me, so I could explain myself. I was sending my message, with a heartbeat.

I was waiting for the answer. It was not coming right away, but it didn’t mean anything. I mustn’t have panicked. I decided to finish my special ‘after-party-day’ lunch with the flashphone on the table, in plain sight, just in case. I realized then that if she flashed me now, she would find me in djellaba and babouches, with my face dug up. I saw that it was always possible to turn a flash into a simple phone call, but I’d rather have seen her and, above all, taken advantage of it to show me in a better mood than the day before. I had to get my act together.

I dragged myself to my room and slipped into the shower again. The hot water first knocked me out, then gradually woke up my headache, like a burn. I decided to gradually reduce the amount of hot water, until the jet became icy. I was shaking under the shock, my breathing accelerating. But my headache calmed down a little and the stop of the water gave me a soft feeling of inner warmth. I dried myself vigorously. Djellaba and slippers on, I went straight to the address of the clothes shop indicated by Josuah.

Property

Where they explain to me everything about property, how to buy an apartment for a week, how rights evaporate with life and how the Overwest has betrayed its ideals.

That big thrift store that had made such a bad impression on me the day before was proving to be busier than I thought. The most used clothes were on the ground floor, hence my first negative impression. But when you went upstairs, you found very decent qualities. To be on the safe side, I wandered through the shelves looking for well-known western brands. Most of them were gathered in a small department labeled 'disposable'. If I looked carefully, I discovered a few that had passed the quality label 'medium'. But they were on display in a department labeled 'hardcore and provock'. After a moment's hesitation, I decided to abstain. If I wanted to avoid new misadventures, it was better to blend into the landscape, find something that seemed normal to the locals. I looked around me to try to take a model. But it was difficult. There were a few people dressed in jeans and a shirt or T-shirt, but they were lost in the middle of the usual colorful fauna. I could see a group of monks, some metalheads, a ballerina, an old wizard in a ceremonial dress weighing a cane with an animal head, a corned-coated nun on the arm of a haughty little marquis, a few funny howlers in overalls and bowler hats... And the shelves perfectly reflected this perpetual Shrove Tuesday.

After more than an hour on the shelves, I was no further ahead. Looking for something simple and plain, I was rummaging through a large pile of T-shirts unfortunately covered with all sorts of colorful and incomprehensible inscriptions when my flashphone started to vibrate. An unknown number was calling me. So it wasn't Clithène. That was a good thing as I wasn't ready to answer her. I accepted the flash.

Gavriil's radiant face appeared to me, thin, tanned, slightly angular and framed by his beautiful black curls. It contrasted with my unearthed face that appears as a thumbnail on the screen.

"Wow, dude, what a face you have!" He immediately threw at me.

This familiarity surprised me a little. It was true that we had already shared a lot, but we only met yesterday. I was trying to keep up with him by sketching a knowing smile.

"Uh... a rough night..."

"Once again a crazy night? Integration, integration, isn't it? Full throttle!"

"I... Last night..." I started, embarrassed.

"Forget it, *mon vieux*. You're damn right to enjoy it. And congratulations on the makeover. Nice djellaba. A gift from a new eastern girlfriend?"

"No, no, I assure you, it's a bit of a coincidence that..."

"No worries. You don't have to tell me everything. In any case, Danái will be happy. This morning I told her you were a bit uptight and she assured me otherwise. And, of course, she was right again. Damn Seb !

"Ha ha !" I nodded, doing my best to give credential to this image that seemed to enhance me in his eyes.

“Well, that’s not why I’m flashing you. This morning Danái welcomed a new teacher from Zekar.”

“She and you *welcomed*...?”

“But no, not in that sense! Danái has her heads. You’re a privileged kid. She’s letting at least three-quarters of the men go. Fortunately, she’s having fun with our female colleagues. But right now I have only a vague notion of the number : she’s far too jealous to invite me over when she’s in bed with a woman.”

What an infernal duo, I thought.

“Anyway,” continued Gavriíl, “I’m not flashing you to talk about our mutual friend’s multifunction butt. The new colleague seems nice and, besides, he is a teacher of normative do-it-yourself, like you. I thought I’d introduce you. Anyway, he’s okay with it.”

“I... gladly,” I nodded. “For sure!”

Meeting a new colleague will take my mind off my dark thoughts and Blue Ties.

“I know a sour bar that makes funny ferments, or, if you prefer, there’s the terrace of the Lilacs’ freexpo. Not very original, but the beer is drinkable and the view is great.”

“Uh, yes, a beer, fine, why not ?” I said, clinging to the one roughly clear word.

“I’m sending you the address. See you in three hours ? Time to get the hell out of your hang-over?”

“Uh, I’m not so bad,” I bragged.

“So in two hours?”

“Perfect.”

“OK. See you!”

Gavriíl gave me a sign and the flash went out. I dived back into the pile of clothes with determination. Less than a minute later, my flashphone vibrated again. I felt a new surge of adrenaline. Clisthène? No, it was just the message that told me the address of ‘freexpo’. I easily located it on the map. It was not too far away. One jump of the Magneto and I should have been there in less than half an hour. I’d got time to pick out an all-purpose look.

Stroll in a freexpo

The address led me to a small three-story building, made of rough concrete, like a 1970's low-rent housing project, a bit dilapidated. Its facades were dirty and entirely covered with tags. I doubted there was a bar worthy of the name in this kind of squat. I'd have imagined it's more of a drug and junkie hangout. I was about to send a message to Gavriil to ask him if he hadn't got the wrong address, when I heard his voice exclaiming in my back:

"Ah! The look! Awesome."

I turned around. He was accompanied by a man of about fifty, dry, emaciated face, framed by abundant favourites. Straight as an i, he wore handsome in his tight leather pants, his purple shirt and his thick black canvas jacket. An old multicolored tattoo protruded from his collar. Gavriil introduced me :

"Bergþór, this is Sébastien. Sébastien, this is Bergþór."

We shook hands. Gavriil continued :

"You know I almost didn't recognize you!"

Turning to Bergþór, he added :

"Sébastien was yesterday in an ultrarigorist's suit. I swore he looked like a severely reactive archaeo-radical. I soon realized he wasn't that uptight. — he winked at me discreetly. — But still! This morning, I flashed him jumping out of bed in djellaba, like *Thousand and One Nights*. And two hours later, priceless, he's in vintage-a-billy! We're gonna call it 'Chameleon-Man'!"

I tried to be as discreet as possible... Jeans, a black polo shirt, simple white sneakers, a half-long leather jacket that was a little worn. I hope I haven't sent out another unwelcome sign of belonging.

"Vintage-a-billy?" I asked with caution. "What is that?"

"Well answered!" Bergþór launched me with connivance. "What an idea to put everything in one category, isn't it?"

"Holà," Gavriil retorted, offended, "I'm not filing. I just know a little bit about it, that's all. Besides, a real vintage-a-billy would've worn a red bandana. Besides, I think it's great that Seb takes care of his look and changes it three times a day. It's a great *trip*."

"We get in? Or do we stay here talking about fashion?" Asked Bergþór.

I nodded to him in sign of my appreciation for getting me out of studying my style.

"Let's go," confirmed Gavriil as he headed straight for the concrete building.

At the entrance, you had to pay three winkies. Gavriil insisted on paying us the entrance.

"I am the inviting power!" He said.

We were going in with the other visitors. We found ourselves following a trace of paint on the floor, which traveled from room to room, in the middle of a heterogeneous pile of paintings, sculptures, collages, and screens where short videos played in a loop... We went from darkness to light, from small, intimate and silent rooms to large halls cut out on several floors. Some rooms were perfectly silent and others were filled with the hubbub of conversation...

"It's a correct freexpo," said Gavriil.

“At which level ?” Asked Bergþór.

“A third.”

“Not bad, indeed,” confirmed Bergþór.

“A third of what ?” Dared I ask.

“Is it your first freexpo ?” said Bergþór surprised.

“You know,” I said, “I’m discovering Arcania. I arrived from France less than a week ago.”

“Gavriíl told me. But seeing you so comfortable, it’s hard to believe.”

I was really appreciating the compliment.

“Damn Chameleon-Man !” approved Gavriíl, proud of me.

“The freexpos system is quite simple,” Bergþór explained. “The organizing association receives a percentage of the ticket price, especially to pay the freexpo workers. Here, the organizer’s percentage amounts to a third of the ticket price, which is very reasonable. The rest is distributed as desired.”

“How come?”

“Each visitor votes for his favorite piece. The rest of the price of his ticket goes to the artist who made the chosen work. In this freexpo, the three winkies of your ticket are divided as suit : one winkie for the organizer and two winkies for the artist of the work you choose. You can vote for several works, with a maximum limit of four. The chosen artists share the amount.

Decidedly, I told myself, these people have funny ideas.

“One does not have to make a choice,” said Gavriíl. “Personally, I always abstain. That way the prize is divided equally among all the artists. It leaves a little something for those who are never chosen.”

“Reward talent is still more equitable !” Bergþór argued.

“Depends from which point of view,” Gavriíl answered with a shrug.

We passed through a room as big as a church nave where rows of small black cabins were lined up, each a few square meters in size. Visitors entered or left by carefully closing a thick padded door.

“What’s that?” I asked, curious.

“You don’t know this either ? You don’t have one in the Overwest ?” Asked Gavriíl.

“Uh, not that I know of.”

“Then, take a guess.”

“Confessionals? Parlors? Dressing rooms?”

“Ah ah ! Nothing so amusing, alas. These are blind’art rooms.”

“Blind’art ?”

“Let’s try, if you want,” suggested Bergþór ; “you’ll figure it out.”

We were approaching one of those cabins. On its door a sign indicated : *Forest Road Diversion*. Bergþór and Gavriíl exchanged a look of approval. We entered the small cube. There were four armchairs there. Gavriíl carefully closed the heavy door. We sat down. Bergþór pushed a switch and it went completely dark. I got tense.

“But,” I asked worriedly, “can you tell me...”

“Shhh!” Did Gavriíl.

I could hear a light breath and the sound of wet dead leaves being crushed. At the same time, I perceived a wet smell of moldy leaves and wood, with a slight hint of rot, which reminded me of an autumn forest. In the distance, a bird song, the wind blowing in the trees, then an incongruous creaking sound, similar to that of an old closet door. The bird and the squeak of the door answered

each other for a moment. The smell took a slightly spicier, pungent turn, with, however, a sweet background that reminded me of lilac. At the same time, the long wail of a violin was rising, at first faintly, then more and more clearly. The squealing of the foliage became regular, as if moved by a heavy breath, increasingly rapid. It was gradually accompanied by a beating of maracas, while a garage smell – a mixture of fuel oil, used oil and hot tyres – appeared. The roar of a car rushing towards us stiffened me abruptly. I only had time to hold my breath, already we were crushed, pierced. A squeal of tires and the driver disappeared in the distance. I was mechanically palpating my arm to make sure I was unharmed. The smell of the forest took over the whole place, barely adorned by the rustle of a few leaves carried away by the wind. The light came back gradually.

“Here it is,” did Bergþór, “what do you think about it?”

“Strange,” I said, still shaken by the realistic sound of the car coming at us.

“We call ‘blind’art’ these creations mixing sounds and smells,” he continued. “There are many different ones. If you want, on the way back, we can visit others.”

“Why not,” I said.

“Some are a little ‘special’,” warned Gavriíl. “I remember visiting one of them, called *Evening Anguish*, which I assure you should have been named : *Metal cutting in septic tanks*. Others, on the other hand, are a bit meek. But there must be something for everyone, right?”

He showed me out of the corner of his eye a couple of teenagers going into a chamber. He told me with a knowing look :

“First love affairs in a blind’art box. Hey hey, let him who was never young cast the first stone.”

Gavriíl was the master of the place, taking us from room to room through a maze of corridors and staircases.

“If you both agree,” he said, “we’ll take a look at the works on the way down.”

A large sign was indicating the direction of the room ‘Videogames, visios and virtual reality’.

“Video games, in an art exhibition?” I said surprised.

“Of course!” Answered Gavriíl. “In most of the free exhibitions, there is also a comic stand, a kitchen stand, a tattoo stand, a LARP stand, a perfume stand, a car tuning stand...”

After climbing a spiral staircase, we reached a roof terrace. After the half-light of the show-rooms, the place, bathed in daylight, made a pleasant contrast. Tables were set up in the middle of a Japanese garden, composed of gravel, mossy rocks and small flowering trees harmoniously arranged. We settled down in this springtime atmosphere. Gavriíl was stretching out his legs and turning his face towards the sun with delight.

“How nice of being able to warm up between colleagues !” he exclaimed, sending me a complicit glance.

Very embarrassed, I looked in Bergþór’s direction, afraid of what he might have understood. But he seemed to have other concerns.

“You graciously call us ‘colleagues’ ,” he said to Gavriíl. “But, as far as I’m concerned, I don’t think I’ve been officially recruited yet. Affoué explained to me that she only has an advisory role.”

“It’s exactly the same for me,” I hastened to add.

“Come on ! Don’t worry, newcomers,” Gavriíl replied. Formally, it’s not Affoué who decides. But her opinions are consulted and followed almost every time. Founder and tribune, that’s a big deal.”

“She is also respected for its science, I imagine,” suggested Bergþór. “Her story of the revolution of the Althingis of St. Imier is fascinating and her reputation...”

“I don’t disagree,” interrupted Gavriíl, “but hey, we’re not lackeys either. Personally, I think that if the board of directors could decide a little more often against her... I’m not saying that against your two hires, of course.”

“Note that, I’m not a complete beginner. In France, I have been a university professor for almost twenty years.”

“And, despite this seniority, you have continued in the same way ?” asked Bergþór astonished.

“Yeah, this is weird,” Gavriíl added, “especially from Chameleon-Man.”

Fortunately, we were interrupted by the server. Bergþór ordered a ‘dry cocoa’, while Gavriíl asked about the draught beers they had and ordered a ‘dark Qosstoy’. He added to my intention : “Do you know cashew nuts ?” As I signaled him that yes, he added : “We get some ?” I nodded again and he confirmed to the waiter : “And two bowls of pickled cashew nuts.” *Damned*, I told myself, *vinegar cashew. You can’t relax for long in this country.* I ordered ‘a tight double’, hoping that it would get rid of my headache. But, as soon as the waiter left, I regretted not having explained to him that it was a coffee.

Suddenly, I felt my flashphone vibrating in my inside pocket. I pulled it out as fast as I could. A message appeared on my screen : “What do you do ?” My God ! It was a message from Clithène. I was receiving a shock that wasn’t missed by my two colleagues. I apologized to them and explained that I had to answer. They exchanged amused glances. I wrote to Clithène that I wasn’t doing anything important. I rewrote to her that I was sorry, that I would go wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted, if she would listen to me, even for ten minutes. As soon as it was sent, I got a reply : “Where are you ?” I found the address that Gavriíl had sent me and I attached it to the message. I sent it dry, without adding any request or comment. Instantly, I regretted it. I should have had at least ended with ‘I can move’ or ‘see you soon?’. Such a dry message... She’d be offended.

Bergþór asked me, slightly worried :

“Some concerns ?”

Without letting me answer, Gavriíl slipped :

“By his head, I’d say frustrated pleasures ?”

“Uh, no,” I said, “nothing special. I, uh...”

The flashphone vibrated and made me jump again. Clithène was telling : ‘OK. Don’t move, I come!’ I was taking a deep breath. A deep joy rose in me, immediately accompanied by anguish. Instinctively, I looked in all directions to see her coming. I quickly realized that it was stupid : she was definitely not here. She must have been given time to arrive.

“So?” Asked Gavriíl.

“She’s... She’s a friend. She... Maybe she’ll join us.”

“Chameleon-Man in action!” Laughed Gavriíl. “Tell us about it.”

Even Bergþór seems to want to make fun of me, but he’s holding back. Seeing them in such a good mood helps put things in perspective. I explain that there’s not much to tell. Gavriíl asks again, but Bergþór comes to my rescue.

“Maybe he wants to keep the mystery,” he said.

“It’s not that,” I replied, “but I honestly don’t know where... I mean, how... And... She’s so... I mean, I don’t know...”

“Enough, it’s clear,” interrupted Bergþór. “And I much agree with you.”

Amused but discreet, he continued:

“So, you who come from so far away, what subject will you teach us?”

“I... I must give a course on the laws of the capitalist West. More specifically, on ownership rights,” I replied.

He seemed surprised.

“Really?” he asked.

“Do you know that I, too, am very interested in property law?”

“Do you have ownership rights in a misarchy?”

“Of course!” Bergþór answered.

“Finally, a real common point,” I said, deeply relieved.

“Which proves that our misarchy is still in the stone age,” Gavriíl grumbled. “We are barely post-capitalos. A big, fat ownership right, just like in the worst plutocracies.”

“I’m not sure that ‘ownership’ from the Overwest is exactly the same as misarchist ‘ownership’” Bergþór objected.

“This is something we should be able to figure out easily,” I suggested, glad to be able to make use of my knowledge.

Eminent ownership and use ownership

“In France,” I began, “according to our civil code, the right of ownership is defined as ‘the right to enjoy and dispose of things in the most absolute manner’. In theory, it’s a right without limits of any kind. It is even perpetual.”

“Absolute and perpetual?” Bergþór asked with surprise.

“Ha! Those capitalos!” exclaimed Gavriíl. “Always admirers of power and domination. So shameless in the expression of primordial compulsions!”

“Indeed,” agreed Bergþór, “it’s fascinating.”

“In reality, I would say that the absolute and perpetual character has been greatly diminished.”

“Of course, that goes without saying,” Bergþór generously added, looking at Gavriíl, as if to say: “You see, they are not as primitive as you thought.”

I decided to push the ball into their court, “And for you, how do your ownership rights work?”

“After the misarchist revolution,” Bergþór began, “one of the most debated questions was abolishing or maintaining ownership rights. The abolitionists argued that most dominations were based on ownership rights and that there would be no liberation until this right was abolished.”

“This wasn’t stupid,” Gavriíl agreed.

“Let’s say it was simplistic,” Bergþór continued. “The abolition of ownership would have been a serious mistake. Appropriation is an obvious, childish, essential urge. A society that forbids it would soon be tyrannical.”

“There are wicked impulses,” Gavriíl retorted.

“Ownership is not without danger, of course,” Bergþór agreed. “But the misuses of a thing are not enough to justify its prohibition. A kitchen knife can be a formidable weapon. Should kitchen knives be banned, and lamb chops only cut with forks? When the owner is the direct user of the thing, when the field is the farmer’s, when the apartment belongs to the person who lives in it and when the company belongs to its workers, then ownership is no longer a tool of domination. On the contrary, it defends and protects the autonomy of individuals. To infringe on that ownership is to attack freedom. The idea that guided the founders of misarchy was this simple: they wanted to abolish ‘ownership as a means of domination’ and keep ‘ownership as a means of autonomy’.”

“Easier said than done,” Gavriíl grumbled.

“In order to abolish the ownership supporting domination, and not the ownership supporting autonomy, it is first necessary to distinguish these two forms of ownership,” said Bergþór as a good educator. “And the best way is to start by giving to each of them a name. The forms of ownership that support autonomy have been named ‘use ownership’. As you no doubt understand, this describes the property rights enjoyed by the user of a thing. The ownership that serves as a means of domination is called “eminent ownership”. It is the property right of a person over the thing that another person uses. With such a right, the owner holds a means of domination, a power over the direct user of the thing.”

“This terminology is actually familiar to me,” I said with some surprise.

“Really?” Bergþór replied.

“For us, it’s an old distinction, long since abandoned. But it was important in the Middle Ages. In those days, it was possible for several rights to be exercised simultaneously on the same property. The right to first crops, the right to second crops, the right to graze, and so on. In this context, it was normal for use ownership and eminent ownership to be superimposed on the same land. It was then common for lords to be recognized as having an eminent right of ownership over the lands of their fiefdoms, while peasants could have a right to use those same plots. Two ownerships overlapped in one place! In the same way, the king had eminent ownership over his entire kingdom, but this did not prevent the existence of other forms of eminent or use ownership. Our eminent ownership was indeed, like yours, an ownership whose meaning was to establish power. And our use ownership was indeed the direct link between the person and the thing he was using.”

“Very interesting! And what happened then?”

“During the French Revolution, from 1789 onward, it was decided to abolish the eminent properties of the King and the Lords. These were called feudal rights and privileges. And they were abolished. The peasant’s right to his land thus became an absolute right, without limits. Use ownership became the only property right. The revolutionary objective was clearly to abolish domination and to protect the autonomy of the people by concentrating ownership of the land in the hands of the one who worked it.”

“But this is exactly the same idea as here!” Bergþór rejoiced. “And it has produced the same effects: the abolition of eminent ownership! To think of all the evil that is said about the capitalist system, and realize we are so close.”

“Precisely,” I said. “This abolition did not prevent domination by ownership.”

“I’m sorry,” said Bergþór, frowning, “but did you just tell me that you abolished eminent ownership after calling them feudal rights?”

“That’s right. That’s what we did. And thus, we have, in principle, placed the right of ownership in the hands of the users. But once this was done, property rights were passed from hands to hands. Some accumulation could not be avoided. And the leases were maintained.”

“What do you mean?”

“We admitted that the owner of a piece of land could rent it to a peasant to farm it for him.”

“But then, wasn’t it maintaining an eminent ownership?”

“The question did indeed arise, but we couldn’t let ourselves equate leases with feudal rights. And it was considered that this type of development of ownership was necessary.”

“Thus, your peasants often did not own their land.”

“Yes, they could be simple ‘farmers’ in much the same way that the inhabitants of an apartment can be tenants, or that shopkeepers do not own their own shops or the shopping center that houses them, or that employees do not own the businesses they work at.”

“But then,” Bergþór noted, “some users depend on the owner of the things they use.”

“In a way...”

“And they have no direct right to the thing they’re using?”

“Not as a rule, no... an apartment renter has no direct right to his apartment. He has a small power on the landlord who, in exchange for the rent, agrees to let him use the apartment, but the right of ownership remains unified and is entirely in the hands of the owner of the apartment. Not in the hands of the tenant-user, even if the latter is protected.”

“In fact, you have not abolished eminent ownership at all! You have decreed that there can only be one property right on a given thing, it is not the same at all.”

“This allowed the peasant-owner to have full rights to his land.”

“And, conversely, when your peasant is a farmer, he is deprived of all direct rights to his land! He no longer has any use ownership.”

“It’s awful,” said Gavriil. “You wished to suppress the eminent ownership to free the workers, but you ended up doing exactly the opposite! You have put property in the hands of the powerful and removed the rights of the users. All property to the lords! And, on top of that, by pretending to suppress eminent ownership... What a joke! Or what hypocrisy!”

As I frowned, he said:

“Well, I’m not saying this for you, buddy, of course.”

“If I understood correctly,” Bergþór continued, “then your bosses dominate the workers by their property rights, your landowners dominate their farmers, the building owners dominate their tenants, or your shopping malls dominate their shopkeepers. Eminent ownership is everywhere!”

“It’s not as bad as you seem to think,” I retorted. “Our property rights are no longer truly absolute. Farmers and shopkeepers are powerfully protected against the owners of the land and of the walls of their shops. They are not owners, but they have rights that forbid them from being deprived of their livelihood and their tools of trade. The rights of tenants on commercial leases have even come to be referred to as ‘commercial ownership’.”

“I don’t entirely understand,” Bergþór intervened; “I thought you had removed the juxtapositions of ownership.”

“That’s just a figure of speech. I just meant that the user of the property is still protected, most of the time. Even tenants of dwellings are protected, less than traders or farmers, but they still have strong rights. In the end, only the employees are still really subject to the owners of the companies.”

“And that’s a lot of people?” asked Gavriil.

“It represents about 70% of the employed workforce. And if we add the civil servants who are, of course, not the owners of the public good, that makes 90% of the workers who remain subordinate to the owners of their instruments of work.”

“It’s terrible!” said Bergþór, appalled. “Eminent ownership enslaves almost your entire population, even though you claimed to have abolished it...?”

“I guess after living in a country like this, you have to be an abolitionist, like me,” Gavriil added. “Only when everything is for everyone will all be free.”

“Everything to everyone,” Bergþór said, “it’s a view of the mind. The same good cannot simultaneously be the subject of a right for all. Not everyone can drive the same car, eat the same apple.”

“I lived in an extec where food was bought by the extec and where everyone came freely to help themselves according to their needs,” Gavriil objected. “And it worked very well.”

“In such a case,” Bergþór explained, “not everything is for everyone. In the first instance, it is the collective, the extec, that holds the right to food. Then, through the rules it adopts, it decides that the members of the extec can help themselves freely. This means that the members can acquire a direct right to these goods by taking them out of the common reserve, by seizing them. It is a rule of individual appropriation by occupation. This must be limited explicitly or implicitly, at least in quantity, for example according to the individual’s capacity to ingest food. It works on

a small scale, in a family or in a small community, between people who know each other, who control each other, who forbid each other immediate selfishness and who can set themselves implicit or explicit rules for the distribution of scarce goods. But, apart from the fact that this does not make ownership disappear, such a system cannot actually be generalized. Moreover, this has never been the system adopted by the Supplemental Arcanian Code. Transferring rights to things to some sort of community or collective, as in your extec, even temporarily, on a large scale, would be appalling. The leaders of that community holding all the property would be the new tyrants. As for the appropriation by the first occupant, this is a rule whose generalization is so violent that..."

"Yeah..." Gavriil intervened. "As long as there are properties, there will be inequalities. And as long as there are inequalities, there will be domination. Just look at Affoué's cottage and the others at the academy: you understand right away. In my extec of flatteners, I can tell you that it was something else. True brotherhood!"

"For some time, with family, friends or in a small community of solidarity, it is possible," Bergþór conceded. "And, besides, nothing forbids it. But, on a larger scale, the Arcanian Supplementary Code adopts the only viable solution: appropriation for use is carefully protected and, for the most part, domination by ownership is avoided."

"I would like to know how you achieve this," I prodded.

The server arrives with our drinks, suspending the conversation for a moment. The contents of the tray were, for the most part, deliciously familiar. My order was just what I expected: a double espresso.

Bergþór's 'dry cocoa' was a small cup of thick, dark hot chocolate. It had a powerful aroma. Gavriil's draught was a beer, nothing more. The only unsavory curiosity came from the cashew nut bowls, which were covered in a dark, syrupy liquid. I concentrated on my coffee, which I took two small sips from. My two companions distractedly helped themselves to the softened cashews. They pricked at them with the toothpicks placed around the bowls before swallowing them, without paying attention to my careful abstention. I took this opportunity to restart the conversation.

"I've already seen some of your rules that tend to limit domination," I said. "I've heard about the importance of your taxes or the role of workers in your co-ops and businesses. But I don't know anything about property rights themselves."

"Our solutions are quite simple," Bergþór began, "although I imagine they can be confusing for a newcomer."

"I'm listening."

When ownership melts like snow in the sun

“Our right of ownership is based on two ancient sayings, both of which aim to prohibit eminent ownership. The first, which you already know, is: ‘He who uses acquires.’ And, the second is, ‘all things flow’.”

“But what does that mean in practice?”

“‘He who uses acquires’ organizes the attribution of ownership. The idea is that ownership should be granted to the one who has the direct use of the thing. ‘Who uses...’ is the user; ‘acquires’ means that he must be the owner. According to this principle, the goods consumed are the property of the consumer. Manufactured goods are the property of the operators — the workers, if you prefer. The apartment belongs to the person who lives in it, the land belongs to the person who cultivates it, the machine belongs to the person who uses it, and so on. As I was saying, we are afraid that if a right is recognized over property used by others, it is tantamount to creating power, domination by the owner over the user of his property. Your rentals and leases are thus unknown to us.”

“I do not see how this can work at all.”

“Our second saying helps us to understand better: ‘Everything flows.’ This means that, like human life, goods pass and decay. The rights attached to them are thus exhausted more or less slowly. Yogurt expires, clothes wear out... and the right of ownership over yogurt loses value day by day.”

“Some things don’t wear out,” I objected. “A house, a piece of land, a precious stone...”

“But life is bounded, isn’t it?” Bergþór continued. “How can one possess forever, when one is mortal? The foreseeable duration of the right of ownership over an apartment or a diamond is constantly decreasing with the owner’s life expectancy. ‘Everything flows.’ With the passing of life, the duration of the right of ownership decreases accordingly. You must agree with that, even in the capitalist world.”

“In the West, as I told you, ownership is ‘perpetual’. That’s a bit poetic, of course. Perpetual simply means that ownership is passed on to the deceased’s successors, their heirs.”

“The horror of hereditary capitalism!” exclaimed Gavriíl. “Well, you see, that didn’t even teach us a lesson. For do you know that inheritance has not been abolished in misarchy. But yes, buddy, I can see why you’re stunned. Inheritance! Shame!”

“Let’s not exaggerate,” tempered Bergþór. “Gavriíl is probably referring to a few small exceptions. But I reassure you, our principle is clear: inheritance is excluded. Giving children the estate of their parents would be very unfair: more wealth for the children of the rich... They already have often benefited from superior cultural capital.”

“Logically, they should give something to society to compensate!” added Gavriíl.

“We don’t go so far as to ask them,” Bergþór explained. “But to give them extra material wealth simply because their parents were already well endowed... Especially if we imagine that this transmission can be repeated from generation to generation. It would not take much more to

create unbearable social divisions: the nobility of the ‘Ancien Régime’, the capitalist high bourgeoisie, the castes of India... These are all good reasons to forbid inheritance, as you said.”

“Well,” Gavriil stepped in, “these are all good reasons that should have made us forbid inheritance! But the Supplemental Code is far from it. The persistent inequalities of our bourgeois misarchy...”

“Excuse me,” I interrupted, trying to understand, “do children inherit their parents’ property, yes or no?”

“In principle, no,” answered Bergþór. “When a person dies, all his or her property goes to the Transitional Fund.”

“To the Transitional Fund?” I asked. “What is the Transitional Fund?”

“The Transitional Fund is a district,” explained Bergþór, “like the Central Fund, which manages accounts in winkies, or the High Court.”

“And this fund recovers all the property of the dead?” I asked. “It’s frightening!”

“It’s quite logical,” Bergþór answered. “Ownership is a link between a thing and a person.”

“In France too,” I said.

“You have to conclude that ownership cannot last longer than a person,” Bergþór continued. “When the owners die, claims to property would be inappropriate, so that’s when they return to the Transitional Fund.”

“Your ownership is for life and ceases to exist after death,” I said to myself. “If I try to transpose this into French law, your ‘property rights’ are in fact only usufructs. And your fund would have a kind of bare ownership right.”

“I don’t really understand what this vocabulary means,” Bergþór admitted. “But I doubt that our system is exactly that. During the lifetime of the owner, the fund has absolutely no rights to the property. It holds nothing. And therefore, a priori, it does not have ‘bare ownership’. The owner’s freedom over their property is total. It cannot be subject to the supervision or control of anyone. For example, there is nothing to prevent one from destroying the property if they wish to do so.”

“I see,” I said, “your ownership is indeed a life right, like our usufruct, but a complete right – with ‘abusus’, like our ownership. I will have to delve deeper into the matter to document my lecture. Nevertheless, in one generation, all individuals are expropriated. Everything must finally belong to your great collective thing!”

“Of course not, and fortunately. The Fund does not remain the owner for very long: that would be contrary to the first saying – ‘He who uses acquires’! It is a ‘transitional’ fund, as its name suggests: its mission is simply to organize the sale of the goods it collects by public auction under good conditions. And this takes place, in principle, within three months of the death. The Fund is an important district, but its power is limited to receiving and reselling...”

“You see,” interrupted Gavriil, while carefully draining a cashew, “an auction! It’s still the rich who win. An equal distribution according to everyone’s needs, that’s what the Fund should do.”

“We are, dear friend, once again in total disagreement,” replied Bergþór, slightly annoyed this time. “Nothing would be worse than the tyranny of a great distributor insensitive to everyone’s tastes!” – Turning to me he adds – “Dear Sébastien, this choice of auction is typically misarchist. It’s not a perfect solution, but it does favor individual preferences, giving the good to the one who is willing to put in the most to get it. And it is not necessarily the richest. Above all, it makes it possible to allocate the goods without allowing the management board or the Transitional Fund administrators to choose the beneficiary! The smallest ability of the district managers to influence

the choice of the final recipient of the goods would most certainly degenerate into abuses of all kinds.”

“This preemption by the collective of all the deceased’s property seems brutal to me. Children may want to keep a few souvenirs: books, jewelry, even the house of their childhood.”

“Absolutely,” agreed Bergþór. “And this is often possible. As I told you, there are some exceptions to the principle of returning to the Common Fund.”

“And they are not negligible, believe me!” Gavriíl bid.

“Really?” I asked curiously.

“First of all, you should know that we have two kinds of property rights,” Bergþór explained. “The stable ownership and the fading ownership.”

“A use ownership, an eminent ownership and now ‘stable’ or ‘fading’ ownership? This is getting difficult.” I said with a frown.

“Eminent ownership is in principle abolished. Only use ownership remains. Among these, we distinguish between ‘stable’ and ‘fading’ ownerships. To explain to you what these are, the simplest way is to start with the fading ownership which, in our country, is the most common. It concerns buildings in particular. You see, I’ve just bought a rather elegant little house on Fondaamenta”

“You live in luxury, comrade,” Gavriíl smiled.

“I’m not complaining,” Bergþór nodded with a smile, without losing the thread of his demonstration. “Naturally, when I die, this house will return to the Common Fund. The older I get, the closer this date gets and the more the durability of my property rights diminishes. Thus, the value of my right decreases with my life expectancy. This property right, whose value continues to decrease over time, is called a fading ownership. For real estate, it slowly fades away with life. Other rights fade much faster: the author’s right to his work or the inventor’s right to his invention disappears in five years. A company founder’s golden share disappears in twenty years.”

“What if you want to pass on your house to your children?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be simplest to give it to them, just before you die?”

“That would be inefficient. No one can pass on more than he has. If I sell my house, I can only sell what I have, so I can only sell a property right limited to the duration of my life. If I give my house to my children, just before my death, it is my limited ownership that they will get back. Their right will end when I die, not when they do. They won’t have time to enjoy it for long. Similarly, if I sell the golden share I have in a company, my buyer will not benefit from it any longer than I could have benefited from it myself.”

“I see... So, if I want to buy an apartment from someone, they won’t be able to sell me more than they have. He has a right to the apartment that ends when he dies. That’s what he’s selling me: a right that ends when he dies, not when I die.”

“That’s exactly like that.”

“And what if I want a more lasting right, to own the apartment until my death, and not until the death of my seller?”

“Nothing could be easier. If your seller is older than you are, to make your right more durable and make it last until your own death, all you have to do is pay an extension premium to the Transitional Fund.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“Not really. There is a simple scale for calculating the value of an extension.”

“If you have the courage to explain it to me...”

“Over time, life expectancy decreases and the foreseeable duration of your fading ownership is reduced accordingly. Therefore the value of what you effectively own decreases as the owner’s age increases.”

“I got it.”

“A simple lump-sum valuation has been adopted to account for this evolution. The value of a property received at birth is said to be worth 100%. At one year, its value is already reduced to 99%; at two years, 98%; at three years, 97%; at five years, 95%; at thirty years, 70% ...”

“You mean, at sixty, it’s 40%; at 80, it’s 20%?”

“That’s right.”

“And at a hundred years old, all assets are worth zero? Everything is free?”

“There’s a minimum of 10% below which we don’t go down.”

“In practice, I confess that I can’t quite imagine how this can work.”

“Let’s take an example, if you like. Where are you staying?”

“Hmm well, I found a small hotel.”

“You’re staying at a hotel?” Asked Bergþór, obviously very surprised. “But I thought you’d just been recruited at the academy.”

“Careful,” intervened Gavriil, protector, “no confusion. There’s hotel and hotel, and some of them have ‘hypercozy’ rooms. Besides, Sébastien has just arrived in Arcania. I’m sure he didn’t have time to get organized and...”

“My apologies,” cut Bergþór. “I didn’t mean to sound intolerant. Besides, one of my best friends is a no-life who has been living in a hotel for almost ten years, and in a Cheap. I did that myself, after my metal phase... Anyway, we’re moving away from the point. For our ownership story, suppose you get tired of your hotel and want to buy my house. Let’s say after a few beers we agree that the total value of my house is a hundred thousand winkies.”

“Your house on Fundamenta Gracht?” intervened Gavriil. “At that price, I’ll buy!”

“It’s just to make a round account. Since I’m sixty years old, I only own 40% of the value of the property.”

“You’re sixty years old,” I repeated, concentrating. “It takes 40 more to go up to 100. So, because of your age, you only own 40%.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Bergþór. “So I have to get 40% of a hundred thousand, that’s forty thousand winkies.”

“I see...”

“But that’s not what you’ll pay, Sébastien.”

“It’s not?” I asked.

“Suppose you’re thirty years old.”

“The truth is...”

“It’s just to simplify the math. If you were thirty years old, in order for your ownership to be limited by your life expectancy, and not mine, you would have to supplement the right you have acquired. I’m sixty years old. The right that I’ve given you is 40% of the total value of the property. If you are thirty years old and you want a full life annuity, which lasts until your death, you must acquire a total of 70% of the value of the property. I’ll give you 40%, so you’re missing 30%. You will have to pay this 30% of the total value of the property to the Transitional Fund, in our example 30% of one hundred thousand, or thirty thousand winkies. Your apartment will have cost you forty thousand, for me, plus thirty thousand for the Fund, that is to say seventy

in total. Which is quite logical since your ownership has a value of 70% of the total value of the property and this property has been valued at one hundred thousand winkies”

“I understand. What if I were older than you?”

“Your right will be shorter than mine. I would still get forty thousand, which is the agreed value of my right, but you, if you’re ninety, will pay less. At your age, your life interest is valued at 10% of the total value, or ten thousand winkies. That’s what you’ll pay me. The Fund will pay me the rest of what I’m owed, thirty thousand. It’s rather logical that it pays, since it wins the transaction: the property will return to the Fund much faster than if I had kept it.”

“And, of course,” I said for myself, “the Fund will not have any cash flow problem, considering all it earns by auctioning off the assets of the deceased.”

“Quite so. Besides, it does not even organize the sale itself; it simply puts them up for auction at the Real Estate Exchange. If you want to buy an apartment in Nehushtân, the easiest way is to consult the list of goods sold by auction on the Real Estate Exchange website. There is always plenty to choose from. You will find the properties sold by the Fund, as well as those sold by individuals who prefer to go through a stock exchange system rather than through peer to peer sales. You will see that prices are relatively moderate.”

“This Transitional Fund must be extraordinarily rich! What does it do with all its money?”

“The sums received are used to restore the properties, to pay the compensation granted to old buyers, to pay a contribution to the conservatory work granted to owners over fifty years old and to a few other things... The remainder goes to the Great Common Fund, which also reduces the need for taxes.”

I remain pensive for a moment. There must be social problems caused by this limited, narrow-minded ownership. I think for a moment before pointing out:

“Since they cannot usefully pass on their assets to their loved ones, the very old people, who see death approaching, may be tempted to ransack their house or apartment. They don’t care: they know that everything will go back to the community anyway.”

“I can assure you that our great old men are hardly in a rage to destroy their possessions. Being able to properly anticipate death is rare. And taking advantage of this anticipation to ransack your possessions is even rarer. Older people, on the contrary, often have a certain taste for comfort, and they take advantage of the Fund’s assistance for conservatory expenses to keep their homes in good condition. Of course, one can always imagine an eccentric who would like to disappear with all his possessions by setting fire to his house.”

“What if that happened?”

“That would be a human right, of course. Anyone can dispose of their property and their life as they see fit. Given the rarity of such behavior, it’s not really a problem. In any case, it is not an economic problem.”

“All right, all right. I mean, if you’re looking for an apartment, I can understand that. This life annuity, ‘fading’ as you call it, seems to be able to work. But as for the other properties...”

“The ownership is fading for all immovable and personal goods”

“Which means?”

“Do you know the distinction between real and immovable property?”

“Yes. Well, in our country, immovable property is, in principle, property that can’t be moved: land, houses, apartments... And then there are the other properties. There are a few nuances.”

“It’s the same in Arcania. What about the distinction between personal and impersonal property?”

"I'm not sure we have that distinction."

"We have just seen impersonal property, which is not by nature attached to a person, such as a house, a piece of land... Personal property is property that is inseparable from a person. For example, the five-year right of an author to his artistic creation, the inventor's right to his invention, or the Golden Share of the founder of a company. These are assets attached to a person, with respect to that person's personal works. And, necessarily, these assets disappear at the latest upon the death of their original owner. There is therefore no return to a common fund, nor is there any complex compensation required. If you set up a business and sell your golden share, your purchaser will only benefit from it for as long as you could have benefited from it, i.e., at the most, either until your death or until the natural extinction of the right."

"Natural extinction?"

"GS are kept intact for ten years, then they decrease until they reach zero in the twentieth year of the company's creation, at the latest. This extinction does not create any difficulty : when the right is extinguished, the GS company becomes a simple cooperative again and..."

"Perfect !" interrupted Gavriil. "You guys had a good talk. It was exciting, but now I'm tired. Why don't we talk about your little property on Fundamenta Gracht? When are you going to throw us a little connection orgy?"

"A connection orgy?" I asked.

"When we've just moved in," said Bergþór, "it's customary to organize a small party for the connection of the accommodation to the Internet."

"We have something like this," I said. "In remembrance of the time when all guests were helping to start fires for warming up the house, we call it a 'housewarming party'."

"What a colorful name!" exclaimed Gavriil.

"True," Bergþór bid, "these primitive terminologies... Uh, I mean these 'primary' terminologies are wonderfully inscribed in the matter. Isn't celebrating the fire that warm up much more beautiful than our 'connectique' ?"

"It's a figure of speech," I said. "So, like this, you just bought a house."

"Exactly !" confirmed Bergþór. "I arrived in Nehushtân last week. And I liked this little house."

"What ?" I asked puzzled, "you show up and, straight up, you're buying? Why so fast?"

"You have to get a place to stay, don't you ? I went by the real estate exchange the day before yesterday and I snapped."

He swallowed some of his cocoa, whose delicious aroma had reached my nostrils, and bit two cashews.

"You bought like that ? That's kind of crazy, no ? Guess you had to take out a loan."

"Yes, of course. I took a little twenty, no risk."

"On twenty years ? But it's terribly long !"

"Well, be polite ! I'm not that old. I'm sixty years old and my life expectancy is well over twenty. So my loan is very reasonable."

"Bound for twenty years ! Not even counting the interests."

"The interests ?"

"Interests on your loan. The Fund must be getting something in return for its loan."

"I have to pay it back, of course."

"I mean, in addition to paying back the borrowed capital, it must be making a profit."

"It would make money off of his own money? How awful!" Reacted Gavriil, offended.

“But I have to pay back everything I borrowed, it’s already good,” confirmed Bergþór. “This way, the Fund avoids the erosion of assets.”

“Debt retention is another retrograde aspect of our misarchy,” explained Gavriíl. “Normally, borrowers should benefit from a rate of erosion of their debt. Debts are rights and, like others, they should fade!”

“The assets of individual accounts are indeed slightly fading,” confirmed Bergþór. “By lending, the Fund enjoys a kind of privilege of constancy.”

“Then, in summary, no interest rate,” I said.

“No,” confirmed Bergþór, “nor any rate of erosion. Once again, the misarchy retains a median, balanced position.”

“I understand,” I said, “if you don’t have to pay interest, longer term loans are better. But still, twenty years !”

“I assure you it’s very reasonable in Arcania. Young people borrow easily over longer periods. A twenty-year-old buyer easily borrows over fifty or sixty years.”

“But who lends them for so long ?”

“Fund agencies do not really take risks by extending the duration of the loans : this allows for reasonable, less risky reimbursements. And, in the event of the premature death of the borrower, the Transitional Fund that recovers the property assumes the repayment of the residual debt. Since young people pay more for their housing than older people, they need better financing.”

“They pay more?”

“Their property will last longer. A twenty year old will have to assume 80 % of the value, where all I have to do is pay 40 %.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.”

“If we don’t want the old guys to have too much of an advantage in auctions, it makes sense for the young guys to get into debt for longer periods of time.”

“So, you just got here last week. And you went into debt like that, for twenty years ! Even with zero rates, for me, this would be a decision that would take months to mature.”

“Oh ! Don’t worry ! I’m a cautious man. I took no chances. I took the insurance.”

“The insurance?”

“The Fund commits itself to take back your purchase at its acquisition price, in exchange of an insurance premium equal to 3 % of the monthly repayment. What makes that, if next year, for example, the property doesn’t suit me, I can resell it.

“At the same price? But then your accommodation won’t have cost you anything at all!”

“Still, there’s the insurance cost.”

“But it is very low, if I have followed you ; 3 % of a refund of, say, a thousand winkies, that makes thirty monthly winkies.”

“And then there’s my age going up. If I sell next year, I’ll be a year older. I bought the property at 40 % of its value. Next year I will be sixty-one year old and if the fund takes it back from me at its value, that means I will get 39 % of the value back.”

“That corresponds to a rent of 1 % of the value of the property for one year, 1.03 % including the cost of insurance. This remains advantageous.”

“Still ! In addition, if I have damaged the dwelling beyond normal wear and tear, the Fund may require an additional monthly payment to be made to restore the dwelling to its original condition.”

“A rent in a capitalist universe is at least 2 % or 3 % of the value of the accommodation,” I said. “With the competition of a possible purchase at 1 % per year and without risk, nobody must rent his apartment. The return would be ridiculous.”

“Rent an apartment? How horrible!” Exclaimed Gavriíl.

“That’s commonplace in the capitalist world,” I said. “The owner of an apartment can rent : for a monthly fee, he gives up the use of it, for a given period of time.”

“These practices that expropriate the user of the property he uses are completely prohibited with us,” confirmed Bergþór. “Who uses, acquires.”

“And if an owner can no longer or no longer wants to live in his apartment ? The apartment remains empty ?”

“An apartment that remains empty for two full years is automatically requisitioned by the Transitional Fund and put up for auction. The owner will receive the price of the sale : ‘Who leaves, forsakes.’ ; it is the reciprocal of the principle ‘Who uses, acquires.’”

“That’s tough. What if my job requires me to be away for two years? And I want my apartment back, which I care about, on my return ?”

“How strange of attaching yourself to property like that,” Gavriíl wondered. “It’s still easier to sell and buy wherever you go.”

“Such attachment to things is a bit weird indeed,” confirmed Bergþór. “But the case was nevertheless foreseen. It is possible to sell under a conditional termination clause.”

“What the hell is that ?” Asked Gavriíl.

“That’s not very used, nor very well known,” Bergþór admitted. “The idea is that the seller and the buyer agree that the sale will be terminated if, between such and such a date, the seller returns and moves back into the dwelling.”

“Such a thing is allowed?” Wondered Gavriíl.

“Let’s say that it’s tolerated.”

“But, then, the buyer is precarious !” Gavriíl protested. “He’s subject to the goodwill of the seller !”

“I agree. It’s kind of an exception to our prohibition. The precarious buyer doesn’t necessarily make a bad deal. He gets a good price, and if the seller does not come back on the agreed dates, his ownership is confirmed.”

“The seller keeps a right on the house he has sold, on the house of someone else!” Insisted Gavriíl. “This is a scandalous !”

“This is not contrary to your principles ?” I asked Bergþór.

“Of course it is ! But we’re not fanatics. It’s all about compromise. And then there are the conditional termination clauses, which are very narrowly framed. They have to be limited to a maximum of three years.”

“And if I have to go away for five years?” I asked.

“You have to sell your apartment. When you come back, if you want it back, all you have to do is wait until your buyer is willing to sell it. As a past user, you will benefit from a right of pre-emption to substitute yourself for another buyer.”

I was looking for inconsistencies for a while. But, stuttering, I had to agree :

“So, your real estate market can function without any tenants. All owners ! A petty bourgeois dream, the collectivists would have said.”

“There are also many collective properties,” Gavriíl intervened, “including for housing. In the extec where I was, the whole community owned all the properties, and therefore also the houses.”

“This type of situation is fortunately exceptional,” noted Bergþór. “In such a system, each individual has only a precarious right of use. And the extec holds a kind of eminent ownership.”

“It’s not related at all!” Gavriíl protested. “All the inhabitants are users and they are owners together.”

“Together... As if everyone could use the same living room together, the same bedroom...,” Bergþór replied. “The user is an individual and, if the owner is a collective... No, for me, it’s an exception to the prohibition of eminent ownership.”

“But I’m thinking about it,” I intervened, “an association of owners ! This is the way to easily bypass all your rules. If I want to pass on my apartment to my children, all I have to do is set up an association with them and sell them my apartment. My children will only have to join to benefit from the apartment after my death: living people die, not legal entities, not associations !”

“You can’t assign more rights than you have. If you transfer your property rights to an association, the association will remain the owner only until your death. Unless, of course, you pay a supplement to the Transition Fund to extend the term.”

“And couldn’t a lifelong association become the eternal owner of a good ?”

“In misarchy, no one can be owner to more than 100 %. An association cannot thus acquire a property for more than one hundred years. If the association persists, it is free to acquire an extension.”

“This reminds me of emphyteutic leases,” I noticed.

“I don’t know what it is,” noted Bergþór. “But I can assure you that it is not a ‘lease’, as you say. The only owner is still the user.”

“Or the users’ association,” said Gavriíl.

“Anyway,” I said, “your associative property is a way to keep a property in a family!”

“It’s true,” Bergþór admitted. “They will even be able to keep the property forever, if they pay the extension of their right regularly. You will note that the solution is not very different from the right of pre-emption granted to former users of a property, or the privileged right of pre-emption granted to indirect users of a property and, in particular, to the children of the deceased.”

I stayed quiet for a moment. Gavriíl took the opportunity to swallow two syrupy cashews at once. Mechanically I caught myself grabbing a toothpick and trying to prick a nut in my turn. The spike went in easily, as in a candied fruit. The consistency was both soft and grainy. The taste reminded me of a kind of candied chestnut, with a hint of acidity, like balsamic vinegar. It was weird, but it was really good. Now I was getting hungry. I took an extra nut, thinking about it.

“I was wondering if you didn’t find it a little depressing to see all your possessions lose value.”

“This is just a little brake on the impulses of accumulation !” said Gavriíl. “Don’t imagine that’s enough. Besides, as if by chance, our friend Bergþór talked to you at length about the fading ownership. Without telling you anything about the stable ownership. A nice picture for tourists!”

“But I was just about to talk about stable ownership,” protested Bergþór.

Islands of stability and inheritance residues

“And what is this ‘stable ownership’?” I asked.

“Assets that are neither personal nor real estate, basic goods (tables, clothes, jewelry, food...), all of them are in stable ownership.”

“Which means that they’re not life properties?”

“All our properties are for life and all properties revert to the Transitional Fund upon the death of their owner. However, for properties in stable ownership, it seemed too complicated to organize a compensation system with the Fund. So we simplified it. The holder of a stable ownership right can keep it until his or her death. Even if he has acquired the property from a previous owner, whether older or younger, it makes no difference. And there is no compensation to be calculated. The duration of the right thus varies according to the lifetime of its holder. For example, if I sell you a painting, you will own it until your death, not mine. Since you are younger than I am and your life span is supposed to be longer, I will have given you a more lasting right than the one I had.”

“If I understand that, an old man with only a few days left to live, whose property is nearing the end of his life, can sell to a young man and the young man will automatically have a right of ownership valid until his own death, which normally does not occur until decades later.”

“Exactly. That’s why they call it stable ownership. We should even talk about extensible ownership, since the young buyer gets a longer right than the older seller.”

“In such cases, passing from hand to hand, the right of ownership may last forever?” I asked.

“In theory, yes. But ownership of property only lasts as long as the property itself. And most movable property wears itself out. Food, clothes, machines, flashphones... : none of these goods are really lasting — well, not by the measure of a human life.

“Right. But there are also durable goods. Antique wardrobes, paintings, jewelry, precious items, a treasure !”

“Correct.”

“And these properties are also under stable ownership?”

“But yes. And, not to hide anything from you, another, much more important good is also in stable ownership: the currency. There’s no other way. We limit the harmful effects of this solution by imposing a small erosion rate on the assets in the personal Fund accounts. But this does not go very far.

“But then,” I said, happy to have found a weakness in their logic, “it is a means of transmitting the wealth of parents to their children! Just before death, to avoid the return to the common fund, it is enough to empty the personal accounts, to give jewels, paintings, gold...”

“Well done! You’ve got it all!” said Gavriil.

“It’s indeed a limit of our system,” Bergþór admitted. “Stable properties can be passed on... and they can even be passed on for cause of death, in testaments.”

“And here you go!” exclaimed Gavriil. “It’s as I told you: an inheritance, like in the Middle Ages.”

“In defense of misarchy,” said Bergþór, “I remind you that the goods that make great fortunes are all fading or personal. This is particularly the case for GS and real estate. Moreover, apart from aid and relief, donations and legacies are taxed at 85 % as soon as they exceed fifteen thousand winkies. And above two hundred and fifty thousand winkies, it is 97 %.”

“Again one of your confiscatory taxes,” I said.

“It’s rather lax,” corrected Bergþór. “I remind you that in principle, inheritance is excluded.”

“The rule of the fifteen thousand winkies, we call it the ‘fifteen thousands privilege’,” said Gavriíl. “It’s one of the most scandalous rules of misarchy !”

“A functional system must accept not to be perfect,” nuanced Bergþór. “This allows for Christmas presents, small inheritances... People are fond of this small flexibility : all the votes to remove this famous ‘privilege’ have failed.”

“Finally, you’ve figured out the flaw in our system,” said Gavriíl. “Especially since nothing prevents the very rich from paying the 97 % and passing on the remainder to their dear children. For very large sums, there’s quite some left !”

“You don’t have any problems with fraud?” I asked. “Parents who sell their valuable furniture at low prices, who pass on ingots or paintings from hand to hand?”

“With the recording of account transactions, our trackers easily track valuable goods, such as gold or works of art. For undervaluation, the tax authorities reassess and tax on the real value. Fraud is difficult, therefore marginal, therefore bearable..”

“If we want to go through all the dirty little hypocritical compromises the misarchy has been able to arrange, it will be long,” interrupted Gavriíl. “The day had started well... And if we look around us, there is so much marvelous things !”

Gavriíl beckoned us to look towards a table on our left, at the other end of the terrace. Three women in their late forties, dressed in somewhat extravagant dresses, were chatting happily. Their gaze was occasionally directed towards our table. It seemed that we were the object of their conversation. I turned to Gavriíl, with a questioning look. I asked him if he knew them. He answered that he didn’t, not at all, but that they had been watching us for a while. Before he could deliver his opinion any further, one of the women got up from her table and walked straight towards us.

She was a tall, elegant, freckle-covered redhead. Her few wrinkles and graying hair were erased by her mischievous smile and sparkling eyes. She pulled up a chair and settled down without embarrassment.

“So boys,” she said, “do you guys often hang out at the bars of freexpo ?”

“Uh, not particularly,” said Bergþór on the defensive.

“With the girls we were just saying that you make a hell of a bunch of bucks.”

Bergþór had a backward movement.

“A pretty bouquet, if you like,” corrected the redhead with a softer voice. “How would you like a round at our table.”

“Hum, you girls are very cute,” let Gavriíl go with a smile, “but we were in the middle of a conversation.”

I was really taken aback. The attitude of this woman seemed to me daring and even shocking. But I was still discreet : in this weird country, it was better that I acted as if nothing had happened.

But Bergþór seemed embarrassed to me, too. The redhead saw his withdrawal, and whispered to him :

“Don’t worry, handsome. We’re not gonna eat you. You’re just coming for a drink with us, no strings attached. We just get to know each other and that’s it. All I’m saying is you’ve got really pretty eyes and that your tattoo, there, sticking out of your shirt, it surely exciting my... curiosity.”

“What’s that ?”

“It’s... It’s a bird’s head with two bonsai trees in the background,” Bergþór answered, flattered by the interest.

The woman took the opportunity to gently put her hand on his while looking at him in the eyes. Bergþór withdrew his hand, but slowly.

“And what about this drink ?” asked the redhead as she suddenly turned to Gavriíl and me. “There are two gorgeous women there who are just waiting to get to know you better. It’s your lucky day, boys.”

“It will unfortunately be without me,” Gavriíl answered politely but firmly. “I have other things to do.”

“Ok, okay,” retreated the redhead, “but you’re not going to forbid your friends from coming over for a drink with us, the little drink of friendship.”

She turned to me.

“I... Uh... Me, neither, I... I...” I tried to say. “I’m busy. I’m waiting for someone.”

I was looking at my flashlight. It had been almost an hour since I got Clithène’s message. Would she have forgotten ? Did she get lost ? Did she meet someone along the way that she had more interested in than me ? Anyway, things were clear : I’d stay in this bar and wait for her until closing, if I had to. And I didn’t want Clithène to find me there with that aggressive redhead. Bergþór suddenly seemed more open :

“Really guys ?” he asked us. “How about a quick drink with these ladies ?”

In the face of our signs of denial, he continued :

“Hey well, as far as I’m concerned, dear lady, if you’ll have me at your table, it’ll be my pleasure. Although I understand that my presence alone...”

“But no, no,” she replied. “Don’t be modest.”

She took him by the hand and she stood up :

“I borrowed him from you.”

Bergþór got up with her.

“As you see it, duty calls me,” said Bergþór. “But we’ll meet again soon to continue these exciting debates ! It was nice to meet you, Sebastian.”

“For me too,” I said, meaning it.

He let himself be led to the three women’s table. He only had time to discreetly turn around to wink at us.

“He’s a little serious, but nice, don’t you think ?” Gavriíl asked me.

“Very sympathetic, indeed,” I nodded, thinking that his seriousness was no longer obvious to me.

We watched him do a light rock’n’roll shoulder roll, do two flawless kisses and say a few words that we didn’t hear, but which, judging by the reaction of his hostesses, seemed very amusing.

“Obviously, he’s got class,” admitted Gavriíl. “He was a competitive swimmer and he was a fairly well-known steam metal singer. There’s something left of him.”

"Sure," I sighed. "Well, you have nothing to complain about," I added, looking at his insolent, ragged beauty.

"Bah, sure," he admitted without false modesty, "I get by."

I was thinking of my aging little belly and Clithène's surfer.

"Well, coming to think of it, I'm suddenly being mockingly mocking, this kind of inequality doesn't seem to bother you too much ? For an egalitarian like you..."

"Bah, we're not gonna change people's taste to please ugly or dumb people."

"Sure," I conceded, a little offended.

"Anyway, it seems to be going well for our friend," he said, pointing to Bergþór, who was happily chatting, as he pointed to the arm of a tall brunette that has already passed over his shoulders. "Don't you feel like joining ?"

"No ! No, I'm not."

"Too old ?"

"But no, they're beautiful."

"Still a little tight ? You want me to go with you ?"

"It isn't that... Like I said, I'm waiting for someone."

"You are still waiting for her ? The one that was supposed to be joining ?"

"She told me she was coming, but she didn't say when."

"You, French people, you're patient."

"I'm in no hurry."

"I imagine she must be worth it. How is she ?"

He was giving me a big, supportive smile. I snapped :

"To tell you the truth, I've never seen or known anyone who comes close to her, not in beauty, nor in energy. It's a whirlwind."

"Oh well !"

"She is very young. Under 30, maybe. And she moves through life like an arrow, with a force that... And, at the same time, I'm sure she's completely insane. In fact, she literally jumped on me. That a woman like her, so young, so beautiful, could be interested in someone like me, it's absurd, isn't it? Besides, she didn't stay with me for long. And a misunderstanding... Well, I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

I was darkening.

"I don't want to pry," Gavriíl slid in.

"You are not. I'm... I'm a perverted old man."

"Perverted ? Do you have original practices that you would have hidden from Danái and me ?" Gavriíl suddenly asked, with curiosity.

"No, no... That's not what I meant. But a man of my age..."

Gavriíl looked at me sympathetically.

"You just flew in from Europe, didn't you?"

"Yes, less than a week ago."

I looked at this sunny, harmonious Japanese garden, exposed to all winds on its concrete building roof. I glanced at the very dignified Bergþór whispering something in the ear of the redheaded woman, under the encouraging gaze of the brunette. I felt heavy, clumsy, cramped.

"And it's far away Europe, isn't it ?" suggested Gavriíl.

"Oh yes !"

Our attention was suddenly drawn to the bar. A man with a hat was whirling around doing magic tricks with a large black cape lined with red velvet. He made a flower, a handkerchief, a small red ball appear and then disappear. Each time, he got carried away laughing : “But what is that ? But you can’t eat that ! It’s disgusting. Disappear !”, and the object was going up in smoke.

“Let’s take a closer look,” suggested Gavriil.

Company

Without leaving the rooftop, I plunged into the misarchist economy, its anti-capitalist entrepreneurs, its international piracy and its creditor workers.

Curled up on himself, the magician seemed to be concentrating. Suddenly, with a deep voice, he threw : “Let’s eat !” He leapt out and held out a bouquet of three beautiful live lobsters in both hands, grasping them by the tail and waving their claws. To my great surprise, I recognized Chung-Su Joseon, the distinguished Asian who had explained so many things to me on the bus trip to Nehushtân.

He didn’t seem to have spotted me and was chasing his act. The appearance of the lobsters did not satisfy him :

“Hum, that’s good. But it’s long to prepare ! It’s a bar, here ! We want delicious little things to nibble on.”

He put his lobsters on the counter and shook his sleeves. A dozen little grasshoppers escaped and jumped around. He tried in vain to catch them by calling : “Hoppies, little wild grasshoppies, come to me.” After having failed in his hunt, he accosted himself to the counter and asked the barman : “And some hoppies ? Do you have some ?”

“But yes !” answered this one amused. “Of course we have. Hazelnut or chocolate ?”

“Oh no ! Not that !” answered the magician by displaying a depicted face. “We need something salty, spicy, new, delicious, delectable...”

In one gesture, he passed his cape over the counter, made the lobsters disappear and replaced them, in the rustle of the cloth, with two large bowls full of little things that I had trouble distinguishing. Joseon then exclaimed while looking at its content : “Miracle ! Saffron hoppies! Green pepper hoppies !” He bowed to the applause of the fifteen people attracted by his act. He invited them to come and help themselves. The bowls were full of small roasted grasshoppers, some a little burnt green, others straw yellow. I suppressed a movement of disgust.

“Do you know the hoppies ?” Gavriil asked me.

“Uh no, not at all,” I said without hiding my apprehension.

I saw the other spectators happily helping themselves to the bowls, starting to shell the insects and swallow them. I looked at Joseon and hoped he would recognize me. But he had entered into a big conversation with the barman.

“In Arcania, they serve hoppies in all the bars,” Gavriil told me. “But these are weird. Usually it’s hazelnut or chocolate. But here... Saffron or pepper ?! We must try it !”

I frowned. Unaware, Gavriil continued :

“You need to remove the end of the shell there in the back of the head. It’s kind of like taking the shell off a roasted pistachio. You can also remove the large paws so they don’t get stuck between the teeth. — He mimics the gesture of ripping the legs off. — I prefer to eat the whole hoppies.”

He put the horrible bug in his mouth and started chewing it.

“It’s very original,” he said, “and really not bad. Much better than sweet sauces.”

He invited me to try. I chose one of the green grasshoppers, which seemed fresher than the yellow ones. I teared off the elytra as best I could, under Gavriil's approving gaze, then I also removed the long, little legs. If I had been allowed to do so, I would have gladly removed the head as well, but this didn't seem to have been planned. Heroic, I put the animal in my mouth and dared to bite into it. It was crunchy on the outside and obnoxiously creamy inside, with indeed a little peppery taste. More fear than harm.

"How is it, mister Debourg ?" asked a voice behind me.

I turned around, taken aback at being called by my name, and I found myself face to face with Joseon. Without his magician's cape, in his impeccable suit, he had regained his aristocratic posture. He put a large traveling salesman's suitcase on the floor.

"What a coincidence to find you, Mr. Debourg," he told me, smiling behind his thin Mongolian officer's mustache. "Do you remember me ?"

"Of course, Mr. Joseon," I said to him, calling his name to confirm my statement.

I couldn't help but send Gavriil a proud glance, as to tell him : "You see, I know people in Nehushtân !"

"You seem to be very well acclimatized to our capital city," Joseon told me approvingly.

This remark, coming from a magician aristocrat, while a vague taste of grasshopper remained in my mouth, seemed to me exaggerated. Obviously, the last time we had seen each other, Clisthène had just left me for her surfer and, lost in my big white dress, on the huge parking lot, I had been seriously disoriented. Today, sitting at a bar with a friend, I must have made a much better impression. I straightened up, anxious to show my new self-confidence, and confirmed :

"I am really starting to appreciate your country."

"He is still a little tight," Gavriil nuanced, "but we helped him relax."

Joseon nodded his head slightly, as if to thank Gavriil for taking care of me — which had the gift of annoying me. Pointing to our table, Gavriil proposed :

"Do you join us ?"

"But, with pleasure," answered Joseon.

He took his big suitcase back and we left to sit down.

"Really very amusing your show," complimented Gavriil, once installed.

"I didn't know you had such prodigious prestidigitation skills," I added.

"It's a hobby," Joseon explained modestly. "Anyway, let's just say I'm happy to be able to use what was just a hobby for a bit. And how did you find my hoppies ?"

"Delicious !" assured Gavriil. "Truly better than traditional hoppies."

"Great, great," congratulated Joseon. "I am delighted."

The barman, who had arrived at our table, asked us what we were having and assured us that the round was for him, putting his hand on Joseon's shoulder. He thanked him, ordered a Fernet-Branca, then added with a knowing look :

"And nothing for a snack. They're gonna try some more hoppies."

I ordered another coffee. Gavriil stayed with the beer. While the bartender walked away, Joseon opened his suitcase. It turned out to contain about ten tin cans with handwritten labels on top, indicating different spices or perfumes, and a few brightly colored ceramic bowls.

"Which hoppies do you want to taste?" asked Joseon. "In addition to saffron and pepper, which I took out at the bar, you have gochujang, paprika, shallot... and even, for our French friend, Auvergne blue cheese."

“Amazing !” exclaimed Gavriil. “I’ve never seen such an assortment. I didn’t even know there were hoppers like that!”

“But they don’t exist, they don’t ! Well, not yet.”

“How come?” asked Gavriil.

“Choose first, then I’ll explain. So ? There’s also horseradish, nuoc mam...”

I chose Auvergne blue, by nationalist reflex ; Gavriil hesitated, then asked for paprika. Joseon took two small bowls out of his suitcase and filled them with a few handfuls of locusts from his tin cans.

We served each other, Gavriil with curiosity, me with courage. Joseon explained :

“These are colorful decticelles, the best ones. The aromas have been worked with the help of a chef ! I didn’t do things by halves.”

“You do them yourself ?” asked Gavriil in amazement.

“Yes ; well, they’re just samples.”

Gavriil suddenly swallowed three paprika hoppers.

“Delicious !” he said with his mouth still full, “frankly delicious !”

I took advantage of the fact that it captured all of Joseon’s attention to carefully slip the grasshopper I had taken into my pocket, while mimicking a small satisfied jaw movement.

“I have every intention of moving to large-scale production,” announced Joseon. “But first, as you can see, I’m testing the market. My idea is to set up a decticelle farm and to offer a much wider range of sauces than those that exist today. Hazelnut, chocolate and caramel : such a limited choice, it can’t be lasting ! My goal is to have a range of about fifteen tastes. There will be new sweet tastes, like honey or blueberry. But I start by testing the salty tastes you see here and doing a tour of the bars, to observe the reaction of the customers... and of the owners. So far, I’ve had rather positive reactions and I’ve even concluded a few initial orders in principle. If it continues like this, I’m going to start soon.”

“You think about becoming a hoppers’ chef ?” asked Gavriil.

“Chef and breeder myself,” said Joseon. “I prefer to control the whole chain and produce my decticelles myself. You see, my project is not just about diversity, it’s also about quality. Organic grasshoppers, crispy, juicy. And I hope to move quickly to semi-industrial production.”

“It’s ambitious,” said Gavriil.

“It’s inevitable,” confirmed Joseon. “A small production would be far too expensive per kilo to be profitable. I already have plans for a production farm and a processing plant. I’m looking to hire four or five workers to help me set it up. But the actual start-up will involve sixteen jobs.”

“I see,” said Gavriil, “you don’t really want to be a cook. You want to start a WA ?”

“Exactly !” Nodded Joseon.

“A ‘WA’? Could you remind me what that means ?” I asked to try to follow the conversation.

“It’s a ‘workers’ association,’” Gavriil recalled. “Like the academy, you remember ? We’ve already talked about it with Danái.”

“Ah yes ! I remember,” I said. “That’s the form of your companies.”

“Correct !” Nodded Joseon. “I want to start my own business. I intend to put my savings into the business, take out a loan in my personal name and thus reserve a substantial GS for myself.” Turning to me, he added: “I don’t know if you are familiar with this mechanism, dear friend : *golden shares*, or GS, are preferential voting rights that entrepreneurs can reserve for themselves. In small businesses it can be a major part — well, in the early stages. The calculation...”

“I know this mechanism,” I interrupted.

“We have already talked about it,” confirmed Gavriil.

Joseon sent me a sign of respect and acquiescence, as if surprised that I quickly learned their rules.

“So you see yourself rather as ‘company director’ ?” asked Gavriil.

“I don’t like that expression,” Joseon retorted, suddenly defensive. “But I’ll grant you that I’m starting out as a reference entrepreneur founder.”

“Personally, I have a fairly clear preference for egalitarian workers’ associations,” Gavriil explained coldly.

“I understand, dear sir,” answered Joseon. “But you must admit that it is sometimes difficult to find co-operators ready to break their piggy banks together. And, for my business, it’s a question of finding farm workers and simple salesmen. I want to be able to give a chance to people who are unskilled and have no assets of their own. Moreover, even if I can understand your abstract preference for egalitarian workers’ associations, you have to recognize that GS companies are necessary for the economy. Without them..”

“Without them, in my opinion, there would be no problem,” cut Gavriil off. “By the way, the egalitarian associations are much more efficient !”

Economics and Politics

I couldn't help but intervene to stick my nose in:

"Egalitarian worker cooperatives are perfectly allowed in my country," I said. "And some of them work very well. But I think Mr. Joseon is entirely right: it's not enough. In France, cooperatives are in a very small minority compared to traditional companies, capitalist as you say. If they were as efficient as you say, Gavriil, they should have supplanted capitalist companies through competition alone. And they are far from having done that!"

Joseon and Gavriil turned to me, both taken aback.

"Competition, you say?" asked me Gavriil.

"You still believe in the spontaneous regulation by the competition?" completed Joseon with curiosity.

"Uh... no, well, not totally," I was embarrassed by the tone of their questions. "But, all the same, the efficiency of our capitalist companies is demonstrated by their success."

"He's like this from time to time," said Gavriil, suddenly protective. "He just arrived from France and..."

"I can understand, I can understand," nodded Joseon.

"Simply," Gavriil explained to me, "in Arcania, apart from a few enlightened people, hardly anyone believed in the regulatory action of holy competition anymore. It is a religion that has almost disappeared."

"But all beliefs are possible, of course," tempered Joseon. "You remind me of a French explorer, like you, who stayed with us for some time, long ago. What was his name then? Blanquette, I think..."

"You want to talk about Auguste Blanqui?" Asked Gavriil.

"Yes, Blanqui, absolutely," confirmed Joseon. "I read that this gentleman was like you, dear Sebastian, convinced of the virtues of competition. He thought that obtaining the right to form cooperatives would be enough to abolish capitalist tyranny. It was enough to let economic competition play out. That was rather optimistic, of course."

"Simple market game was never enough to free anyone," confirmed Gavriil. "If slavery was abolished in the IIIrd century in Arcania, it was not because the large slave estates went bankrupt in the face of competition from small farmers. It was a story of revolt, sabotage, revolution and sometimes war. And yet slavery was not only infamous, it was also less productive — at least, most of the time. Even a real comparative advantage is not, and never has been, enough to eliminate tyranny."

"I even think that spontaneous human relationships, if that means anything, go more towards the concentration of power than towards its dissolution," Joseon bid. "Power tends to strengthen itself and since, by definition, it is not without means of influence, it often succeeds in doing so. In situations of chaos, it is the clan, mafia or militia leaders who prevail. The 'natural' course of things leads more readily to tyrannies imposed by force than to peaceful misarchies."

“On this point we are in complete agreement,” agreed Gavriil. “You know, Sebastian, when our economy was deregulated in the XIIIth century, as a result of liberal utopias, large merchant companies, in monopoly or oligopoly positions, were quickly created, with powerful leaders at the head of these companies, accumulating wealth and power. This was far from the spread of small, equal and efficient producers that utopian liberalism had dreamed of.”

“The misarchy is a voluntary construction of high civilization, wrenched away by struggle,” added Joseon. “It is through law that we limit tendencies towards the concentration of power.”

“Besides, I imagine that in the history of your country, it’s a bit like that,” Gavriil added. “You’ve seen some improvements. And it would surprise me if these improvements were the result of the spontaneous action of an invisible hand or a holy competition.”

I remember that the end of slavery was indeed the result of 1793, of the fighters in Haiti, of the 1848 revolution and the Civil War. Feudalism ended in the burning of the castles and their registers of privileges, during the summer of 1789 and the revolutionary night of August 4. The spontaneous play of the market was not enough. Moreover, in China, the small autonomous peasant farm had largely demonstrated its effectiveness when the ideology of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ destroyed it in 1958 to set up large collectivist estates, quickly creating famine.

“In my opinion,” pontificated Gavriil, “it’s the history of ideas that makes history.”

“It’s perhaps more complicated,” Joseon nuanced. “Ideas also have causes. And the ineffectiveness of some ideas can end up wearing them down.”

“Anyway,” added Gavriil, “the search for original causes does not make much sense in history. At best, one can observe correlation or simultaneity.”

“You still admit that some political systems are frankly less productive, less effective than others,” I replied. “Are you familiar with Korea ? One part, in the north, is governed by a despotic communist system and the other part, in the south, follows a democratic capitalist system. The North is one of the poorest countries in the world, while the South is one of the richest countries and is at the forefront of world technology... Not everything is economically worthwhile.”

“I completely agree !” Nodded Joseon. “But the North Korean regime, though ineffective, is still in place, isn’t it ? It seems to me that a political regime is all the more effective when it allows the energy of its citizens to express itself. Domination must be chased in the name of freedom but also because it blocks the energy of the dominated. On the other hand, when equality prevents the most dynamic, talented or deserving from expressing themselves, it becomes not only despotic, but ineffective. Everyone must be allowed to develop his or her potential, including greatness, as long as this is not at the expense of the development of others. This is true in all areas. We must protect the freedom of expression of the weakest, but also that of a great journalist or opinion leader. And a society would commit suicide by restraining those who feel an entrepreneurial spirit. Entrepreneurial activity is protected in misarchy. And it is also protected against the burdens of the mediocre and the immobile. It is not by banning talent that people can be set free.”

“Let me tell you that I completely disagree with this defense of inequality,” replied Gavriil, again frosty.

“Freedom is not only the right to stay at his rank !” protested Joseon. “It is also the right to build, to develop, to create. Misarchy would be a tyranny if entrepreneurial freedom was not protected there, on a par with all other essential freedoms.”

“Here you are !” exclaimed Gavriil. “You see, this gentleman expresses exactly the dominant misarchist thinking. Fans of big GS are well and truly served ! — turning to Joseon he added,

caustic : — Deep down inside, you might even want to become a real capitalist, wouldn't you ? Are you tempted by piracy ?”

“But, finally, sir, I will not allow you!” protested Joseon annoyed. “Know that I've always fought against capitalist deviance. In my previous job...”

Gavriil didn't let him continue :

“Your fear of the ‘burdens of the mediocre and the immobile’, your willingness to start *your* own business. These are capitalist impulses that are expressed here !”

“This has nothing to do with it,” protested Joseon. “My business will also be the one of the workers ! How can you suspect me of wanting to expropriate them from their business ?”

“But that's what you will do !” Gavriil replied. “Your *golden share*, from whom will you take it, if not from the workers ?”

“Well, I had the idea, I took all the initiatives, I will put my savings into the business and I have been working on the project for almost six months !” Protested Joseon. “I'm not going to share everything with the first person hired, who hasn't done anything yet and hasn't contributed anything to the company.”

“If you want to decide everything, you just have to work alone,” Gavriil replies. “For me, only self-employed workers and egalitarian workers' associations are acceptable ! One man, one voice ! Nothing else !”

“I see,” Joseon whispered, “you're a flattener.”

“I'm a member of the Equalibers,” said Gavriil, “but...”

“And you're a dreamer,” completed Joseon. “Totally egalitarian organizations would suppose a powerful coercive system forbidding all heads to overtake. Fortunately your ideas are in the minority.”

“You are just a conservative.”

“But yes. Yes, I am. I don't see what the harm is. I'm a misarchist and I'm not ashamed of it ! I've been a tracker, you see, and...”

“You have been *tracker* ?” cut Gavriil suddenly disgusted.

“Yes, yes,” said Joseon again, “I assume it and, in fact, I'm proud of it. It was during this time that I was able to observe how many companies operate. And that's what pushed me to make a decision.”

“Your buddy, it's a capitalist tracker,” whispered Gavriil between his teeth.

“Listen sir,” replied Joseon, “we hardly know each other. But as I understand it, your values are different from mine. That's no reason to insult me and...”

“I'm sorry, but I have a hard time with spy cops, especially the ones who want to turn themselves into exploiters of the people.”

“Sir,” said Joseon frosty, “you're revealing your ideological intolerance here.”

“You call me an *ideologue* ? And *intolerant* ?” Exclaimed Gavriil.

He got up abruptly. I had a backward movement, worried.

“I may have gone a little far,” tempered Joseon, “but you must admit that you yourself...”

I was waving to Gavriil to calm down.

“Your buddy the head snoop called me intolerant !” Said Gavriil. “Of course, for a guy like you, just fallen off the capitalist tree, you can't realize. But I'm out of here, it's better.”

I stood still, confused.

“You come or you stay ?” asked Gavriil firmly.

On the one hand, Gavriil, who was beginning to be a friend and, on the other, that Mr. Joseon, so polite, so kind... But I didn't really have the choice : Clithène could arrive at any time. I was not leaving this chair.

"I... I'm waiting for someone," I said.

Gavriil shrugged his shoulders.

"As you want. Be careful what this gentleman tells you, or I'll have to start your education all over again." — Turning to Joseon : "Mr. the capitalist tracker, I bid you farewell."

He left abruptly, with a brisk pace.

I was waiting for Gavriil to get far enough away so that I could no longer be heard and I apologized to Joseon :

"I, I'm truly sorry," I said. "I don't know what got into him."

"Don't worry," said Joseon quickly regaining his composure. "I'm used to it. A lot of people react strangely when I say I was a tracker. When it's not epidermal, like your friend, it's a kind of impressed respect, which is almost worse. Your relative indifference to it is quite exceptional and very restful, I assure you."

I vaguely remembered my fishmonger-banker-cellarman telling me about trackers. If I remembered correctly, these were people who had access to all the financial data, all the bank accounts.

"There... there's got to be some kind of check," I said.

"Exactly," approved Joseon. "As you say. Somebody's got to do the job. This is nothing but very normal, right?"

"Absolutely, absolutely," I nodded.

This country didn't know cash. Nothing must escape these super-controllers. Trackers... the eyes and ears of the system. So Joseon was some kind of super-cop. I remembered how shocked I was when I first arrived to learn about the lack of cash and the general control it provided. On the other hand, to get along with a character who held such power is probably prudent. And this Joseon didn't look too dangerous.

The waiter arrived, carrying the Fernet-Branca, my coffee and Gavriil's beer.

"I leave you the beer ?" he suggested. "Now that it's pulled... — Pointing to the direction Gavril went, he added : — Nothing bad ?"

"No, no, nothing important," assured Joseon.

"Perfect, perfect. Well, then good continuation ! And enjoy !" he said by pointing to the hoppers.

I took one right away and did my best to show I appreciated it. The waiter walked away and I stayed with the grasshopper in my hand. This one was of an indistinct color, a kind of dirty blue-green. It was the variety announced at 'Auvergne blue'. Joseon looked at me attentively. This time, there was no escape. I was husking it, trying to remember my first attempt — basically, bearable. I mimed a smile of interest and appetite, and I put it in my mouth. This insect released a pungent, foul-smelling liquid under my tooth, like the dirty juice oozing from old garbage cans. I swallow a big swig of beer to get it through, repressing as best I can a grimace of disgust.

"So this beer, how is it ?" Joseon asked me amused.

I realized that I've seized authority over Gavriil's beer.

"Fortunately, that I'm not really a beer lover," Joseon continued in a playful tone. "Neither you of Auvergne blue hoppers, isn't it ?"

“Uh... how can I put this... In Europe, we don't eat bugs. Well, not often... and the Auvergne blue tastes quite different in Auvergne. And I'm still not used to...”

“Don't justify yourself. Everyone has their own tastes, right ? By the way, this attempt with Auvergne blue is perhaps not the most successful.”

“You know,” I honestly said, “I'm probably not very representative of your country's tastes.”

“You have tasted other flavors of hoppers ?”

“I tasted some green hoppers.”

“The pepper hoppers. So ?”

“Well, frankly, I think it's much better. I was even surprised to find it not so bad, I mean, not bad at all.”

“Hmm... we can make it more glamorous. You make it sound like even if I went into piracy, I'd have a hard time exporting my products to France.”

“Piracy ?”

“Pirates are responsible for most of the import-export in Arcania. It is an unsavory brotherhood, which does not hesitate to exploit poor subordinate workers outside Arcania. Some capitalist branches in the Overwest are even run by misarchist pirates. The misarchy lets its citizens go elsewhere to do what is strictly prohibited here...”

“How come ?”

“It is unfortunately very difficult to prohibit acts that take place far from Arcania. And misarchy has hardly succeeded in moralizing the behavior of its inhabitants. Our workers' associations are as greedy for profit as any capitalist enterprise. And when the laws do not prohibit them from exploiting humans, they do not deprive themselves of it. The Athenian Democracy, the Roman Republic, the Venetian Republic, and the European democracies of the late XIXth century were all relatively egalitarian regimes compared to their neighbors. But they were also the worst colonizers outside their borders. Misarchy is probably the freest and most egalitarian political regime within its borders. But that is not why its inhabitants behave in a more civilized way when trading or setting up branches abroad. Perhaps even the liberation of energies that misarchy allows leads to a certain liberation of predatory instincts ? Unless it is only the slight technological advance that our long studies and the importance of our free time produce. Either way, misarchy is proving to be a formidable regime in international trade. I am afraid that this is hardly moral. But as long as misarchy is not global, it is very difficult to avoid this opportunistic piracy.”

“Excuse me,” I said, “but I thought you were planning to go into business for yourself. You don't seem to think it's immoral to start a business, or to profit from it.”

“No.”

“And, at the same time, you're defending yourself from being a capitalist.”

“Fortunately !”

“But then, what distinguishes your misarchist company from a capitalist company?”

What happened to capital : the company's debt to workers (CoDeW)

"In your capitalist companies," began Joseon, "I understand that power belongs to the capital providers."

"Yes, that's usually the case," I confirmed. "There's some logic to that. When you buy an apartment, you own it and you do what you want with it. When you buy a business, it's the same."

"An enterprise is a set of tangible and intangible assets, put at the service of an organization, a set of human activities. However, in Arcania, ownership of a good must be granted to the person who uses this good : who uses acquires. The company's users are first and foremost its workers. It is therefore logical that they become the owners."

"I understand that logic. But the heritage aspect seems inevitable to me. Companies are made up of people, but also of goods and values. Whoever has spent money to acquire these assets cannot be forced to give them as gifts to those they hire."

"You are absolutely right," approved Joseon. "And I'm sensitive to this aspect of things, since I've just put all my savings into my business. It is all the strength of the misarchist right to have found a compromise between these two logics, personal and patrimonial, of companies."

"You mean that you give one part of the voting rights to workers and another part to capital providers. A kind of fifty / fifty ?"

"No. We've known this system since the XIXth century. We called it 'co-management'. But it's an archaic model, now obsolete. Since the 1960s, misarchy has moved to self-management. All the power is in the hands of the workers."

"But, so where is the compromise ?"

"The power is granted only to workers..., but it is modulated in time according to whether they are founders or not, capital contributors or not. The objective remains 'one worker, one voice'. But this objective is only slowly being achieved. This allows entrepreneurs to receive fair and prior compensation for their contributions, before gradually giving up their power. We were talking earlier about the *golden share* or GS."

"Yes, I know. It's a preferential voting right given to the entrepreneur. It can be important, especially in small businesses, but it diminishes over time. In the long term, after twenty years in principle, your workers all have equal voting rights. This does not tell me who owns the company, its machinery, its land, its customers ?"

"The share of ownership and voting rights are linked. First the voting right to which a worker is entitled is calculated. Then he or she has to acquire an equivalent share in the company. If an employee is entitled to 1 % of the voting rights, he must eventually become the owner of 1 % of the company."

"In a capitalist company," I said, "it's the opposite : if an investor owns 1 % of the company, he gets in principle a voting right of 1 %."

“I see,” Joseon noted thoughtfully, “in both systems, the right to vote tends to be equal to the share of ownership. This may be inevitable... But the logic is opposite : you calculate the voting right according to the capital invested. We calculate the capital that has to be invested, according to the voting rights that have to be obtained. The hired worker must buy a share equal to his voting rights only when he has finished paying his share that he will be able to exercise his voting rights in full.”

“And if he doesn’t have the money ?” I asked. “What if he doesn’t want to put his savings in his company ?”

“As long as the worker has not acquired the full share to which he is entitled, a fraction of his salary is withheld. This fraction is at least 20 %. It allows the worker to gradually acquire the share to which he is entitled.”

“So, with a fraction of his or her salary, the newly hired employee gradually buys a share in the company’s ownership. In France, we would say that he buys shares, or a share of capital.”

“In misarchy, we say he’s buying a piece of CoDeW.”

“CoDeW ?”

“The CoDeW, or ‘company’s debt to workers’, is the key concept of misarchist company law. If you are really interested in our economic organization, I will have to explain it to you precisely. Do you have time ?”

“Yes, please.”

“A company, to create itself, needs money,” started Joseon.

“For sure.”

“Let’s take my personal case. According to my calculations, I need about five hundred thousand winkies to launch my hoppers business, to pay the farm, the small processing line, the first expenses, the first salaries and some cash flow.”

“And where did you find this amount ?”

“I found a Fund agent who believes in the project and a few individuals who participate via a *crowdfunding* site. Obviously, to convince both of them to lend money, you have to give them guarantees on the first assets of the business. So I had to finance those initial assets myself. I had some savings and I pawned my apartment : in all, I lent the company 200,000 winkies. My company owes me this amount, as its worker and, for the moment, as its only worker. These two hundred thousand winkies are the company’s debt to the workers, its CoDeW. A worker’s share of CoDeW determines his or her right to vote. I am a creditor of 100 % of the CoDeW. So I have 100 % of the voting rights.

“And if you hire ?” I asked.

“If I hire an employee in an egalitarian association, he will be entitled to 50 % of the voting rights. But he will only be able to exercise them once he has acquired 50 % of the CoDeW. Before he has the same voting rights as me, he will therefore have to reimburse me half of my contribution, i.e. one hundred thousand winkies.

“But if he pays it with his 20 % payroll deduction, he’s going to be paying it for years, even dozens of years !”

“You’re right : with two workers, one who puts all his assets and the other who invests only his minimum participation on salary, a workers’ association can only become egalitarian in the very long term. A flattener like your friend would find that shocking, but not me.”

“And that’s a huge drain on your paycheck for many years.”

“As most of the founders, I intend to reserve a *golden share* for myself. This will reduce the voting rights of other workers. And the share they’ll have to buy will be cheaper.”

“I see.”

“Note that I can only have preferential voting rights because I am an entrepreneur, in other words, because I work in and for the company. Capital contributors who do not work in the company do not have any voting rights. Some shares may be reserved for consumers or clients of the company, for example in consumer cooperatives or mixed associations. After all, they too use the company. But a capital contributor is never associated with power as such.”

“If you don’t give any power to outside capital providers, it shouldn’t be easy to find funds.”

“Not as long as you have a serious project. With us, money left lying dormant in a cash account loses value. This encourages individuals to empty their Fund se accounts in order to lend to contractors. This is one of the reasons for the success of the calls for savings. And our Fund officers have financial incentives to grant loans, particularly in venture capital. Your businesses can’t find banking loans ?”

“Of course. But they also work thanks to investors who buy a share of the capital. These are not strictly speaking lenders. They’re not meant to be repaid.”

“For us, any contribution is analyzed as a loan to the company. However, it is true that the CoDeW is a little different. Contributions made by third parties, such as credit agencies or individuals, do not give any power over the company. They are intended to be repaid in full. The contributions made by the workers constitute the company’s debt to the workers, the CoDeW. This gives power and is never fully repaid. Rather, it is intended to be shared. The new workers buy shares of the CoDeW from the old workers until equality is achieved. The 200,000 winkies I put in the company are a share of the CoDeW that I will sell to the other workers as my power over the company is reduced.”

“And to buy it from you, your new workers will be deprived of at least 20 % of their wages ?”

“That’s it”

“So, the alumni get rich on newcomers ?”

“Necessarily : the right to vote is a right over the company, therefore also over its assets. It has a patrimonial value. Those who lose their voting rights must receive financial compensation. There is a certain justice in this.”

“But you’ll still take some of their salary. This is reminiscent of the profit that the capitalist makes from the work of his employees.”

“It’s quite different,” protested Joseon. “The employees are going to pay me, but they are buying me something in exchange : a share of CoDeW and the right to vote.”

“It’s true that the capitalist does not give shares to the workers in exchange for the profit he makes. But, all the same, your workers pay for shares in CoDeW, with no guarantee of having any effective influence. Especially in small businesses, where the entrepreneur has been able to retain the majority of voting rights with a big *golden share*. The worker buys wind at a high price.”

“CoDeW shares are not wind ! If the worker resigns or is dismissed, his or her share of CoDeW will have to be fully and immediately reimbursed. He will then get his stake back. With his minimum participation, the worker will have built up a patrimony.”

“Still.”

“And if the company is growing, he will have acquired for cheap something that will be worth a lot more. He can make a hell of a lot more gains !”

“How come ?”

“In principle, the company’s debt to workers is regularly revalued according to the real value of the company.”

“I’m having a hard time understanding.”

“My company starts with five hundred thousand winkies of assets and three hundred thousand winkies of loans pledged on these assets, due to Fund agencies or individuals. My company’s net worth is the difference, or two hundred thousand winkies. This sum is also what I put into the company, the company’s debt to the workers. So the CoDeW is initially equal to the value of the company, which is quite practical. To ensure that this equality is maintained, the CoDeW is regularly re-evaluated. This allows the CoDeW to remain equal to the value of the company, whatever the ups and downs of business life. If I do bad business, my company will be worthless. My share of CoDeW will be worthless, too, and I will have lost my money. If I do good business and the value of my business increases, the value of my share of CoDeW will also increase.

The same reasoning works for any worker who acquires a share of CoDeW. If I hire a worker today who has to acquire 5 % of the voting rights, it will cost him 5 % of two hundred thousand, or ten thousand. But let’s assume that all goes well. The company uses its profits to reimburse cash agencies and outside investors, and we expand. The company sells hoppers all over Arcania and even beyond. Then its value will be, perhaps, ten times higher. The CoDeW will be revalued by that much. And the original worker, who bought his share at ten thousand winkies, will now own one hundred thousand.

“It’s a little crazy.”

“And logical, at the same time. The increase in the value of the company is the result of the work of the workers. It is logical that this increase is reflected in the increase in the company’s CoDeW, which is, I would remind you, the company’s debt to its workers.”

“So, by selling your CoDeW for ten times its initial value, you could be considerably richer !”

“But yes ! We can dream, even if a multiplication by ten is still a bit improbable.”

“Even if you ‘only’ double, you’re going to get considerably richer on the backs of your employees.”

“I am going to get a lot richer, but not ‘on their back’, as you say. We will get rich together : the price at which a worker buys his share is fixed at the date of his employment. The increase in the value of the company, and therefore the value of the CoDeW, benefits all the workers who have worked for that increase.”

“It’s an important difference with our system,” I admitted. “In the capitalist company, the increase in the value of the enterprise does not benefit the workers, even though it is through their work that this increase takes place. Except for a few stock options sometimes given to managers.”

“Stock-options ?” Asked Joseon.

“It’s marginal,” I said to avoid going into details. “The big difficulty must be to evaluate companies. The shares of CoDeW can only be sold and bought by workers in the company, so there is no real market.”

“The value of the business is the amount that could be derived from the sale of all of its assets, after the termination of the business. We add up the credit of its accounts, the possible proceeds from the sale of its machines, buildings, know-how, customer file... Sometimes, this evaluation takes into account the probable future of the company, its potential and the threats hanging over it. There is an independent and regulated profession in charge of these evaluations.”

“Still, I wonder if it would not be simpler to leave the value of the CoDeW at its original amount — in your case two hundred thousand winkies.”

“Sometimes the CoDeW is treated as a real loan, the amount of which is fixed in cash, with small interests capped at 2 %. But this solution is only practicable in very small family businesses, or in some extec. In companies of a certain size or with a certain growth potential, the evaluation of the CoDeW in cash would be really dangerous for the development and even the survival of the company.”

“How come ?”

“If the shares of CoDeW are fixed in cash and the value of the company doubles, the workers in place will be reluctant to hire : this would force them to sell ten winkies for a share worth twenty. A hell of a gift ! And the workers would be encouraged to vote to dissolve the company. This dissolution would create a division that would allow them to get more money back than they would get from selling their share, in cash, to the other workers.

On the other hand, if the shares are regularly revalued according to the real value of the company, existing employees can accept new hires without difficulties : the share they give to new employees will be paid at the right price, according to its real value. And if these new hires allow the company to grow, this will increase the value of the shares and benefit everyone.

Moreover, with such a revalued CoDeW, those who want to immediately recover the value of their shares no longer need to vote for dissolution. All they have to do is resign. They will then be immediately reimbursed for their share of the CoDeW, based on the present value of the company.”

“And if the company does not have the means to immediately repay the value of the share of the resigning workers?”

“It’s obliged to do so and still has the means to do so. It’s easy to borrow from the Central Fund the value of a share of a resigning worker : it represents a share of the real value of the company. If the company is worth a lot, the share is worth a lot, but the pledge that the company can guarantee to the Fund is high. If the company is going badly, it is no longer worth much and the pledge it can offer the Fund is low... but the employee’s share is no longer worth much either.

The company can therefore still borrow the value of the resigning employee’s share. This makes it possible to reimburse the resigning employee immediately. If the employee has a successor, he or she will have time to redeem the share. If there is no successor, it will give those who remain time to buy it back. Sometimes, it is the company itself that reimburses the share and thus reduces its CoDeW.”

“Workers may still decide to shut down the company and share the fruits of the sale of its assets.”

“It’s their right, of course. This is the way to recover the value of their CoDeW, which they would also have recovered if they had just resigned. There is no special patrimonial incentive to vote the death of a company. Rather, in practice, employees tend to vote in favor of the sustainability of their company and their jobs. Predatory workers in their own companies are quite rare.”

“It’s probably one of the interesting things about your system, I’ll admit. It avoids predatory behavior. In our country, some vulture capitalists buy up devalued companies to skin them and sell them for cutting up, with no regard for activity or jobs. In your case, since the owners are the workers, I imagine that they are more concerned about their own jobs. What if the company loses money ? What happens?”

“The company goes into new debt...”

“But, after a while, no one has to lend it to him anymore.”

“Of course. So it ends up not being able to pay its creditors or its wages. It ends up going bankrupt.”

“And employees lose everything ?”

“There is an insurance policy that provides them with payment of the last wages due. But their share of CoDeW is lost.”

“So, your employees assume a share of the risks of the business !”

“Exactly. This may be one of the secrets to our hourly productivity. It’s also the ransom of freedom. Let me remind you that CoDeW share is a right to vote, a power. Responsibility is indexed to power. Conversely, complete security is always paid for with complete submission.”

“And if a worker prefers to remain powerless, without responsibilities ?”

“This would be a violation of all our principles. And, for that matter, a return to capitalism.”

“The Western-style solution, with a proprietary boss and subordinate employees, is surely in line with the will of some. But you are forbidding it ?”

“To abolish slavery, even voluntary slavery, had to be outlawed. In order to destroy capitalist despotism, it was necessary to impose a generalized right of workers to vote and, therefore, a minimum *compulsory* participation. If you free only those who have the strength to refuse slavery, you free only the strong.”

“An imperative release is a bit of a contradiction in terms.”

“You’re right. No release can be *truly* binding. What misarchist law dictates is that workers have the right to vote. It doesn’t order them to use it ! If they want to remain in the peace of the obedient, free to them. They don’t have to overthrow the despotic old founding director. But they can. At least it forces the bosses to be polite and respectful, that’s something.”

“And you, as the founder,” I asked, “are not afraid of being kicked out of your own company when you fall in minority ?”

“I’m glad you’re a little worried about me,” Joseon smiled. “Certainly, the workers I’m going to hire will be able to fire me, as soon as they have a majority of votes. But it will cost them dearly. If they lay me off, my full share of CoDeW must be paid back to me immediately. With my *golden share*, firing me will be particularly costly.

“It might not be enough to talk them out of it.”

“At least I would’ve gotten back what I put into the company. And even more, if the company has increased its value.”

“Still! Getting fired from your own company. In our company, it is not uncommon for the founder of a company to make great sacrifices when starting up his business. Sometimes he even works for years without paying himself. What if this were the case for you ?”

“If I work without pay, my claim on the company grows. The increase of the CoDeW for founders who do not pay themselves is at least the amount of the net minimum wage. The workers firing me should thus compensate me for the unpaid work I have done.”

“But you would still be kicked out of your company ! Expelled from the company you imagined, created...”

“Effectively, it wouldn’t be very pleasant. Having said that, in order to get myself fired by the workers I have chosen and trained, I would have to be very clumsy or very disrespectful to them. These are people I know, who know me well. And who appreciate the company I founded, since they have decided to stay and join it. There’s a good chance they will appreciate my work. And

they don't need to fire me to take over. They already have the power. They can very well appoint another director. Besides, I have no intention of remaining a director at all."

"Do you see yourself at a subordinate position ?"

"I hope in time to become a tribune and free myself from such ungrateful managerial tasks, while retaining some indirect influence. You know, the difficulty usually encountered in companies is not the instability of the founder-managers, but rather the excessive respect accorded to them, which leads to keeping them in office much more than would be useful or desirable. Do not neglect the habits of obedience. Initially, the founder-contributor holds the CoDeW and a strong *golden share*. And his legal dominance can last for years. Obedience habits have plenty of time to develop. Not to mention the fact that, even in a minority, a GS remains a significant percentage of the votes for a long time. And if the workers are divided... It is regrettable, but it must be recognized that the founders often remain dominant (in fact, if not in law), especially in small companies. Even when the GS has fallen to zero, after twenty years, it is common for the historical founders to keep the upper hand."

"Maybe the decay period for *golden shares* is too long ?"

"It's long indeed. All the more so with the gradual acquisition of the CoDeW and the right to vote ; and, in case of high turnover, a founder may never lose the majority, at least in a small company. Do you think there should be a shorter period?"

"No, no, I mean, I don't know. I'm just noting that your small business is quite similar to our small capitalist company."

"You think so ?" Asked me Joseon, suddenly worried. "We would still be there ?"

I want to tell him that capitalism has some qualities that they did well to preserve. But I remember Clithène's reaction when she thought I was a Blue Tie. It's best to be careful.

"I... Uh... there are still differences, of course," I said.

"Sure, but are they so important ?" Wondered Joseon aloud, pensive.

"For sure," I said encouragingly. "Already, in the long run, all your businesses end up being self-managed, if I understand correctly, which is more than a nuance."

"A very long term. Ten, twenty years, even more... If my hoppy company remains small, it will look like a small capitalist company for a long time..."

This observation, which should make him happy, seems to worry him. I'm digging to find more differences :

"There's also the issue of profit. Unlike a true capitalist, you couldn't hog the profits. Well, I suppose. Because, to be honest, I don't know how any profits are distributed in your system."

"Profits can be used in four ways. First, they can be retained by the company, i.e. reinvested or kept in reserve."

"In which case, the assets go up," I said. "This increases the value of the CoDeW for all workers."

"Second," continued Joseon, "the profits can be used to reimburse the third parties that financed the business : banks, *crowdfunders*."

"In which case, the liabilities go down," I said. "This also increases the value of the CoDeW for all."

"The third possibility is to use the profits to reimburse workers for part of their CoDeW."

"As you are the only contributor, at least at the beginning, it would be like transferring you the profit ?"

“Yes, but this would decrease the value of the CoDeW and thus the cost of workers acquiring a share of the CoDeW. Workers could acquire their voting rights faster and cheaper. If the whole of the CoDeW is paid back to the founders, new entrants acquire their voting rights without having to pay anything. This sometimes happens in small family businesses, but it is rare. Existing workers generally want new entrants to pay for their integration, as they did in their time. It is, however, common for part of the CoDeW to be reimbursed, especially when the business has grown in value. Older entrants thus receive part of the value of their share of CoDeW immediately. And this prevents new entrants from having to pay too much of their salaries for the sake of the minimum shareholding.”

“More simply,” I suggested, “since you are a worker and in the majority, you might decide to increase your salary. It would be a nice way to appropriate the profit.”

“It’s the last way to use profits : raise wages. But it is impossible to capture profits in this way. In our country, there is a maximum difference between the best paid and the worst paid.”

“Oh really? And how much ?”

“It depends on the size of the company. There’s a formula about that... -he looked on his flashlight. — Here it is : if ‘x’ is the number of workers, the maximum income gap is $15(x + 5)/(x + 50)$.”

“Again a mathematical formula !” I protested. “It’s difficult !”

“Not so much. All the legal calculations useful in running a business fit on a spreadsheet, and only a few lines. And, by the way, the idea is very simple : the more workers there are, the bigger the gaps can be. The formula tends towards sixteen, which is the absolute maximum in a company. It is colossal, but it is a maximum.”

I dared not tell him that in France, some company directors were paid a hundred times more than their employees.

“A deviation from one to fifteen or sixteen is only possible in very large companies,” Joseon continued, “and requires the agreement of the majority of workers. In smaller companies, where the founders can be the majority alone, the deviations are more reasonable. With three workers, the wage gap can’t be more than... $15(3 + 5)/(3 + 50) = 2.26$. If my company has only three workers, I could only be paid a little more than twice as much as the lowest paid worker. In a company with 20 workers, the maximum difference is in the order of one to five. Thus, in small companies, the distribution of profits by the wages of some quickly forces the wages of others to increase.”

“And you cannot distribute profits to workers in proportion to their share of CoDeW.”

“You mean pay them back their CoDeW ?”

“No. Give them dividends. With us, shares give a right to share in the profits.”

“Nothing like that here ! There are no other ways to use the profits than the four I have just told you : retention in the company, reimbursement of third parties, reimbursement of workers, distribution in wages.”

“It’s a big difference from capitalism,” I said. “You don’t have stocks. Your shares in CoDeW look like what we would call ‘obligations’ in financial law : a kind of bond reserved for workers, indexed to the value of the company, with voting rights, and redeemable at any time on the decision of the company or the resignation of the owner. These are very original bonds. But they allow the profits to always go to the workers. In the first two cases, they increase the value of the company and, therefore, the value of their share of CoDeW. In the latter two cases, they are distributed to the workers, either as a repayment of CoDeW or as a salary.”

“I don’t see how it could be otherwise : the profits of work must go to the workers.”

“I believe that this is why it can be said that capitalism has indeed been abolished in your country. And, at the same time, you have retained the freedom to undertake, the spirit of entrepreneurship. It’s not totally egalitarian, but it’s interesting.”

“I don’t say that our system is perfect,” admitted Joseon. “But simplistic solutions all seem terribly dangerous to me. In the capitalist world, power is given to the providers of capital and workers are expropriated from their tools of labor. In some egalitarian utopias, perfect and immediate equality is granted to all workers, but neither property value nor entrepreneurial freedom is respected anymore. I find these two solutions equally unjust. And I think that our compromise is fairly balanced. You are going to tell me that I live in a misarchist system and that I am perhaps too used to it to imagine innovative solutions. Appreciating compromise and moderation is perhaps a defect of my age...”

He was brutally interrupted by a female voice exclaiming behind me :

“Long live the excesses! No more moderation!”

My heart was jumping. I had instantly recognized Clisthène voice. I turned towards her, clumsily, at the risk of falling out of my chair. In the backlight, my wrinkled, dazzled eyes could only perceive her silhouette.

“So boys, you’re chitty-chatting ?” she launched cheerfully. “Do you still think you’re in the bus ?”

“I... I didn’t... see you...,” I stammered, in shock.

“Madam Ben Mabrouk, if I remember correctly,” greeted Joseon.

“Exactly ! But you can call me Clisthène. I remember you very well, too. You’re the man on the bus, Mr. Chonchon.”

“Chung-Su Joseon : you were almost there!”

“Hey yes ! I have a memory for names,” Clisthène confirmed.

She pulled out a chair and sat between us.

“And you ?” She suddenly asked me, with a cooler voice. “How are your Blue Tie friends ?”

“But no,” I started desperate. “As I wrote to you, I didn’t know. And they’re not my friends at all. I have nothing to do with them. Those Blue Ties are atrocious. I asked around. I’m sorry about that.”

Clisthène didn’t flinch and her eyes remained glacial. Too bad if I was ridiculous, I continued with all the excuses that I had prepared :

“I just arrived ! You remember my educational cloning, no swap. But I’m not a dirty capitalist... I’ve learned a lot and I’m still learning.”

“If I may,” Joseon intervened to my rescue, “we had a long discussion with Sébastien and I can assure you that he certainly does not deserve to be likened to a Blue Tie. For a newcomer who has only been here for a few days, his adaptation and understanding of our system seems to me, on the contrary, remarkable.”

I took a grateful look at this distinguished man and turned with anguish towards Clisthène.

“Maybe,” she said, “but this wasn’t your first slip-up...”

She was observing, cautiously, my new style of dress. At least my new clothes didn’t seem to shock her — that was something.

“Well, you guys were awfully focused on your discussion !” She said for a change. “Was it interesting ?”

“Mr Joseon was just explaining to me that...”

“And what’s this stuff ?” interrupted Clithène as she discovered the contents of the bowls. “These hoppers look really weird.”

I watched her help herself to the bowl ‘Auvergne blue’ and shell one of those nauseating insects.

“You will tell me what you think of them ?” asked Joseon.

Clithène swallowed and immediately made a face :

“Berk, not so good. It’s moldy. What about the others ?”

She helped herself to the bowl ‘paprika’ and tasted one. Her face lit up :

“Wow, unbelievable, those are definitely super ! I’ve never eaten anything like that.”

She immediately took up some of them and asked :

“And then where were you?”

“I got myself into the business of making hoppers,” said Joseon. “You’ve just tasted some samples.”

“ ‘Cause you’re the one making them ? Awesome. Well, the red ones, because the blue ones...”

Joseon opened his suitcase and presented his entire collection in a somewhat theatrical gesture. His fine distinguished mustache highlighted a proud smile. I realized that I hadn’t even tasted the paprika hoppers. Clithène seemed to find them delicious. I’d take one, while Joseon listed the flavors of his creations. The taste was very slightly spicy ; the texture, crisp and melting at the same time, was finally not unpleasant, once you forget what it was made with. I was recharging my batteries while listening to Joseon explain his whole project to Clithène, who was enthusiastic. Joseon made her taste one by one all his preparations. She asked for more, applauded and ended up giving him a big kiss on the cheek. This slightly impregnated the cheeks of the impeccable Asian.

“It’s awesome ! exclaimed Clithène. Do you mind if we start being on a first-name basis?”

“No, not at all, on the contrary,” replied Joseon slightly confused.

His easy acquiescence to familiarity annoyed me. But Clithène seemed to have relaxed and I was starting to breathe easier.

“You got some pictures of the farm you want to buy?” She asked Joseon.

He pulled out his flashphone and started showing her pictures.

“Who’s she, there?” She asked.

“Here’s my wife, Mbissine, and my two children, Chin-Sun and Kaourou.”

Joseon showed them to me. His wife was black and his children were mixed, but a father, a mother and two children posing nicely in front of a monument... I couldn’t help but feel a certain relief.

“I’m monogamous and straight,” explained Joseon. “It takes all kinds to make a world, isn’t it ? But that’s not quite what I wanted to show you.”

He scrolled through the photos to the image of a fairly large, rectangular, disused building on a hillside. It looked like a 19th century factory. The beige plaster and the flat tile roof seemed to be in fairly good condition. A dozen rounded windows, framed with red bricks, regularly pierced the two floors of the building.

“It’s an old silkworm farm, a silkworm nursery,” said Joseon. “The shell is in good condition. We’ll probably have to change a few windows. But the view is superb. The idea would be to

turn the whole north side into a hatchery. There would be a room of about two hundred and fifty square meters, enough to install the first cooking and seasoning line. And we could build a large screened paddock on the adjacent meadow for rearing. The southern part could be kept as a dwelling, at least in the early days.”

Joseon showed the different types of oven he was hesitating between, the plans of the hatchery and the insect greenhouse... I felt my flashphone vibrating. I'd received a message from the buxom Danái. Clithène seemed to be completely absorbed by what Joseon was showing her. I took the opportunity to open the message discreetly. The word announced :

“Dear academics,

Attached, this month's rookie list. Congratulations and welcome to them.

All to their welcome drink this 29th messidor, from 8 pm, central square of the academy, with the Rapid Raptors.

For the Board of Directors : Danái ! »

I opened the attachment and took a look at the list : my name was there! I was officially a teacher at the Kouad Academy.”

I raised my head, cheerful, to see Clithène excited, taken by a new passion for locusts. As for me, I was a teacher in Arcania. I'd talk to her about it as soon as she calmed down a bit.

“It's really awesome !” exclaimed Clithène. “And he, next to the wooden door, who is he?”

“It's Felix, he's an agricultural engineer. He advised me on all the breeding part. He has a real experience with insects. As soon as things get going, I hire him. I've already talked to him about it.”

“He is so cute! So sweet!”

Worried, I signaled that I wanted to watch, too. On the flashphone appeared a chubby man with a bushy beard, his face framed by a gray mane of filthy dreadlocks, and dressed in ample floral trousers and a coarse linen jacket that he seemed to have made himself. Just looking at the photo, it seemed that he smelled like sheep dung and wood fire.

“You saw the huge mass of dreads he got?” Threw at me, Clithène. “Years of work ! Classy. This hoppie farm is gonna be a hit. You're gonna sell billions!”

“Well, if you like it that much,” went on Joseon, seduced, “I'm looking for workers to start and ...”

“You're offering a job ?” Asked Clithène.

“Yes, why not ... why not,” answered Joseon.

“Sure, I like raising bugs. Back in the fraternity, I used to raise goats. And your stuff, I'm sure I can sell some for you anywhere.”

She seemed ready to follow Joseon, locking herself in with clouds of insects and a bearded man with oily dreadlocks. She didn't seem to care about me at all anymore. But I didn't want her to leave me again. I decided to hang on.

“I find this project exciting, too,” I said, “and I might be interested.”

“But why not..., why not,” said Joseon, looking at me friendly.

“Anyway, I'm in !” said Clithène.

“Me too,” I said. “I think it's all... your project, the locusts... it's... it's great and... of course, I don't know if I'd know how to deal with the... the bugs. These little creatures have to crawl all over the place and to get them... And if you try to cook them, they have to jump around, but...”

“Don't worry,” Joseon reassured me. “There will be simple tasks that require no special skills. I'm sure you could do it... Besides, in the early stages, it will mainly be renovation work, setting

up. As well as — he turned to Clithène — the conclusion of the first sales contracts. And, with your charm... Yes. Why not ? I might just take you both on a trial basis.”

I was about to agree to Joseon’s offer, when Clithène interrupted me, putting her hand on my arm :

“We still need to negotiate,” she said.

“Of course, of course,” conceded Joseon under the spell.

“First, how much will you pay us?” She asked.

I wasn’t dreaming : she was also negotiating for me. So she didn’t seem to be opposed to me going with her. And, for a moment, she put her hand on my arm. I started feeling that this grasshopper farm could be an exciting experience.

Practical calculations

“Don’t expect wonders at first,” Joseon apologized. “For the moment, there is no production and no sales... Until everything is in place, there will be work... and not much income.”

“We aren’t going to work for nothing still?”

“No, no, of course. I’ve budgeted enough to pay the first few salaries. But I couldn’t go above minimum wage in the early days.”

Clisthène made a disapproving pout and went on :

“With a salary this low, it’s gonna take us a thousand years just to get our share of CoDeW.”

“You exaggerate ! If you agree to work a few extra hours, it can go pretty fast. And the hours would be very useful for the company, especially at the beginning.”

“Hmm,” cut Clisthène, “and what’s the latest minimum wage?”

“Around fifteen winkies the hour, gross,” answered Joseon by checking on his flashphone.

“It isn’t so bad compared to the Overwest,” I noticed. “It’s more than double the federal minimum wage in the United States. And even in France, which is one of the most developed countries in this area, the minimum wage is about eleven euros per hour, including all employer and employee charges, which is not far from eleven winkies. Germany has a minimum wage of just under nine euros, which is about the same in winkies.”

“Obviously, compared to the miserable wages of capitalos hell,” Clisthène retorted, making big eyes at me. “Besides, 15 winkies is the gross wage. If we deduct taxes and the minimum compulsory participation, we would earn almost nothing. It’s almost all volunteer work. — she was tapping on her flashphone and talking out loud. — Fifteen winkies for sixteen hours a week...”

“Sixteen hours a week ?” I interrupted, surprised.

“Yes, I am counting on a full-time,” she said. “We’re not suckers !”

I remembered that Josuah, the kid from the hotel, had already told me something in this direction : a full time job at sixteen hours a week... But I hadn’t taken it very seriously. While Clisthène was in her calculations, I took the liberty of asking Joseon :

“But how can your company function if people work so little. In our country, full-time work is thirty-five hours and it is one of the lowest levels in the OECD.”

“Working less,” started Joseon, “people are working better and their productivity...”

“Maybe,” I interrupted, “but to this point !”

“Additionally, these sixteen hours allow anyone who wants to work to do so,” said Joseon. “And, finally, we do not prohibit overtime.”

“Overtime,” intervened Clisthène, “for what it’s worth...”

“Overtime brings workers back about a quarter of an hour,” Joseon explained to me.

“A quarter ?”

“Yes, overtime is taxed at least at 75 %... 77,5 % to be precise,” he added after checking on his flashphone. “Whereas full time hours, for low wages, are only taxed at 10 %. An overtime hour thus yields, in net, four times less than a normal hour.”

“At this prize, no one must do some.”

“It’s indeed a deterrent,” agreed Joseon. “And this level of dissuasion is calculated to encourage the development of extraprofessional activities: activism, family, associative, friendly, cultural, intellectual... Because these activities are an important part of our wealth.”

“Even so people keep working more,” said Clithène, “pulling her nose out of her calculator. Because most of them don’t really know what to do except work. And they always want to have more winkies. Mentalities are so retrogrades!”

“The choice to have a higher standard of living doesn’t shock me,” Joseon retorted. “But, yes, the average working week is twenty-four hours a week — which is a lot.”

“You are going to think the Arcanians are all out for money,” Clithène told me, “and you’ll be right.”

“Even an average of twenty-four hours a week,” I said, “I think that’s reasonable.”

“Really ?” Wondered Clithène. “But do you realize ! Twenty-four hours a week! That’s three big days of work a week! Not to mention the exhaustion that ruins you on the fourth day. That’s what I call losing your life trying to earn it! Slaughtered like convicts, from thirteen years old to death...”

“What ?” I, too, was surprised and scared. “You make children work? And the elderly?”

“For the youngest and the oldest, it is forbidden to exceed halftime,” Joseon nuanced, “eight hours a week. And physical capacities must be respected. Physically hard work is of course forbidden for young and old alike...”

“Still! In our country, people start later and finish earlier,” I said proudly, happy to show that for once our system was more protective, more social than theirs.

“And how do your young and old earn their living?” Asked Joseon.

“Parents provide for their children, often up to the age of twenty and beyond. And retirement pensions can be received from the age of sixty to seventy, depending on the country.”

“This is interesting,” Joseon admitted. “We prefer to encourage the financial independence of younger people. With certain limits, of course. As I was saying, only half time is allowed before the age of 16, and up to the age of 25, overtime is prohibited because of compulsory training. For those over sixty, compensation pensions make it possible to gradually reduce working time without losing the standard of living. After the age of 70, workers are only working part-time, or even quarter-time for the oldest among us.”

“You mean between eight and four hours a week.”

“Exactly.”

“And you don’t have any limit of age ?”

I was imagining old people, suffering from senile dementia or in wheelchairs, forced to follow production lines. But the image was quickly contradicted by Joseon :

“When health problems come, substitute income is, of course, paid by compulsory insurance, as for any temporary or permanent disability — regardless of age, of course. And full replacement incomes are automatically available from the age of 75. However, it is common to continue working at a reduced level even after that age. Our life expectancy is ninety-two years and age discrimination is severely punished. To exclude from professional activity in the name of age is a nonsense in our opinion!”

“So, I understand you’re working less, but longer. And since you don’t seem to suffer too much from unemployment... In total, your society must produce as many hours of work as ours.”

“Hopefully not!” Replied Joseon. “If we were still at the stage of labor generated by capitalist exploitation...”

Clisthène interrupted us :

“Getting back to our business, I did the calculation : fifteen winkies times sixteen hours a week, times fifty-two weeks, divided by twelve months, that’s one thousand forty winkies gross monthly..., minus the 10 % minimum wage tax. Our net monthly salary, at the legal minimum, would be nine hundred and thirty-six winkies for sixteen hours a week.”

“Exactly !” Approved Joseon. “You know a lot about salary calculations.”

“As a great abbes, I was doing a little bookkeeping.”

“Again one of your talents,” added Joseon admiringly.

“Yes, well, what I wanted to say,” said Clisthène, not distracted by the compliment, “is that nine hundred and thirty-six winkies is really not much.”

I, too, felt vaguely disappointed. I knew one wokie was worth about one euro. So their net minimum income was a little less than our monthly minimum wage. Of course, this was for a working time of 16 hours a week, which would be less than half time for us. But, well, it wasn’t opulence.

“I would point out that the standard of living allowed by your minimum wage here seems not much better than at home...”

“I’m not sure that our income can really be compared to that in your countries,” Joseon objected. “Because of our melting properties that facilitate housing and our free services : education, health, legal defense, Internet, flashphones, public transport...”

“We also have some public services,” I protested. “I recognize that, on the cost of housing, the difference seems to be...”

“Séb is right!” Cut Clisthène. “It’s a miserable salary, worthy of a capitalos hell! Especially since the minimum participation of 20 % still has to be removed. In reality, we will have almost nothing left. Wait, I’m calculating... 748.80 net winkies per month. At that level, that’s volunteering!”

“Naturally, I can guarantee enough overtime to pay for this participation,” proposed Joseon. “And even more, if you want.”

“Work more to win more : the road to exploitation! That’s exactly what I was saying,” Clisthène grumbled.

“It’s what usually happens,” said Joseon, looking for a little support. “Paying participation on base hours is too expensive, especially for minimum wage workers. Whereas paying overtime is very advantageous.”

“And why that?” I asked with caution.

“Because of taxes : the amounts intended to pay for the participation are exempt from all taxes. However, overtime is taxed at 77.5 %. It is therefore worthwhile to pay for participation with overtime pay. For example, if you agree to work four overtime hours, i.e. a total of twenty hours per week, multiplied by 15 winkies per hour, this would give you a gross salary of 1,300 winkies per month, which would be subdivided into 260 for participation, 104 for taxes and a net salary of 936 winkies.”

“104 of charges for a gross salary of 1,300 winkies per month,” I noticed, “it’s really very little ; well, compared to what we usually pay in France.”

“It’s because, in my calculation, your overtime pay is fully allocated to the reimbursement of your CoDeW and is therefore not taxed. But when you leave the company and your CoDeW is reimbursed, you will have to pay the 77.5 % tax. If you include this deferred tax, this means that in the long run, out of your gross 1,300, you still pay 305.50 winkies of charges.”

“Even so,” I said, “it’s still far below our mandatory deductions. I find it hard to understand how you’re doing.”

“We are squeezed like lemons, you mean!” Clithène intervened. “You’ll see, when you get your accumulated CoDeW back, with taxes, there will be almost nothing left. The workers’ savings are pumped through taxes!”

“Tax subsidizes the employee takeover by not taxing the amounts spent on participation in CoDeW,” Joseon explained. “It does not subsidize the accumulation of personal capital. In fact, I agree with you, my dear Sébastien : this level of taxation remains modest. But we’ve done the calculation on the minimum wage, which is relatively low-taxed. On higher wages, taxes go up, of course.”

“I heard that in the higher income brackets, rates of over 90 % were possible.”

“True, for very high earners only. In your case, we only counted four hours of overtime, whereas on average my fellow citizens do more. Also to be counted are the earnings of the Great Common Fund, to which the properties return. Finally, we have retained a very unfair but very effective tax, which we call the value-added tax.”

“You have a VAT?”

“Yes, you know that?”

“I do,” I said, happy to find a landmark.

“Our VAT is at 20 %, which brings in...”

“20 %? But it’s exactly like France !” I exclaimed.

“I understand your surprise. The fact that we have kept this old tax is highly questionable... But its profitability is such that it is a facility from which we have still not escaped. We are trying to make up for this unfairness in the revenue stream. But free services and aid to the poor are expensive. All in all, the share of added value socialized by the compulsory levies is in the order of 54 %...”

“We are moving away from the subject,” interrupted Clithène. “I noted a participation of 260 a month. With that, how long would it take to acquire our CoDeW share ?”

“My ambition is to move very quickly to a production large enough to produce hoppers in a semi-industrial way, at a competitive price. For this, I would need at least 16 workers. It is with this number that I made the calculations that I presented to the Fund agents. — He dug a little on his flashphone and read : — With sixteen workers and a GS at four,” he told me, “I will end up with : $4/(4 + 16) = 4/20$, i.e. one fifth, or 20 % of the votes. The workers will therefore share four-fifths of the voting rights and of the CoDeW. Since there are sixteen workers, they will each have one sixteenth of the four fifths, or $4/(5 \times 16)$, which is still one twentieth of the voting rights and of the CoDeW.”

“You told me that your CoDeW is 200,000, and one-twentieth of 200,000 means a CoDeW at 10,000 each,” I interrupted, happy to get my good student feeling back.

“That’s right!” Approved Joseon.

“So if I have understood correctly,” I repeated, “each worker will have to pay 10,000 winkies in order to be able to exercise one twentieth of the voting rights. These sixteen 10,000 shares are yours to sell. So you get 160,000 in total. As you initially put in 200 000, you have now only put in 40 000 winkies from your pocket : 40 000 out of the 200 000, which represents 20 % of the total CoDeW and which is also the amount of your voting rights. So I was not mistaken.”

“Bravo!” exclaimed Joseon, happy to see that I had learned his lesson.

“With a participation of 260 per month,” Clisthène said again, leaning back on her flashphone, “it will still take us... three years to pay our share of CoDeW ! Three years of overtime if we want to get a decent wage.”

“To be exact,” I intervened, “it could be much longer ! You did the math with the hiring of sixteen workers. But, at the beginning, the time of implementation, we will be only a few.”

“But, as soon as the implementation is complete, you can start to resell some of the shares you have acquired to other workers. And, once this implementation is completed and the order book is full, the company will already be worth more. This will make your CoDeW purchase price very advantageous...”

“Hmm, maybe,” I said. “But if we stay with a small operation, let’s say with just the two of us, Clisthène and I, then the share we’ll have to acquire will be larger and our repayment period will be much longer. Wait, I’ll do the math.”

I dived in my flashphone, not without pleasure, to show how much I now master my new knowledge. While I was typing on the calculator, I said aloud :

“Two workers, with a GS at four, that makes a GS of $4/(4 + 2)$, or $4/6$, or $2/3$. Clisthène and I should acquire $1/3$ of the CoDeW, or one sixth each, or $200,000/6$, divided by 260 winkies per month, that’s 128 months ! More than ten years !”

“But I’m certainly not going to stick to two workers,” Joseon insisted. “And besides, if you agreed to invest yourself fully with me, to work more overtime and to put everything into CoDeW..., with eight hours of overtime per week, even in your school hypothesis, in five years it’s done ! And you’ll have accumulated a significant heritage.”

“No way we’re doing more overtime!” Clisthène replied. “And ten years is far too long. That’s the whole life!”

“Anyway, this math doesn’t add up,” tried answering Joseon. “I already intend to hire Félix and, very soon, at least one or two other salesmen. What’s more, as soon as the business starts to turn a profit, I intend to pay back some of the money I put into the business. The total CoDeW of the business will be reduced by that amount and so will the cost of your share.”

“All the same, the share is expensive,” I insisted.

“If you think your participation is too heavy, I can always increase my *golden share*,” noted Joseon. “You know, I can go up to a GS of ten. And then your share would be divided by two...”

“Yes why not do that,” I said, taking him at his word. “At least our participation refund would be much shorter.”

“No, no, not necessarily,” Clisthène intervened, giving me a hard look to make me stop. “I prefer a GS that’s not too high. A four-person team is fine.”

She leaned towards me, as if to give me a kiss, and took the opportunity to whisper very quickly, the most discreetly possible : “The hoppers are going to be a hit. The CoDeW is going to be worth a lot. The more we have, the more we win!”

Maybe it was to shut me up, but she was kissing me. Oh, that was wonderful. I stopped listening for a while to realize what had just happened.

When I came back to the conversation, it had taken a more precise turn :

“In extreme rigor, we could try to go up to 950 monthly,” let go of Joseon.

“980 ! Clisthène replied by crossing her arms and shaking her head in a sign of irreversible rejection.

“Even to 965, really it wouldn’t be reasonable,” protested Joseon.

“To 965 ?”

“If necessary, yes, I could accept...”

“Then it’s slammed,” Clisthène exclaimed, banging on the table.

Joseon pretended to hesitate for a second, then he imitated Clisthène, at the risk of spilling the glasses.

“Agreed, it’s slammed!” He said with a big smile.

Suddenly, all the tension seemed to be released between those two.

“You wore me out,” Joseon said happily to Clisthène.

“You are tough in business, good for our company!” Clisthène replied. “Come on, your turn,” she added to my intention ; “you have to slam.”

With such an invitation, I didn’t hesitate and I happily banged on the table, being careful not to hit too hard, so as not to upset the drinks.

Joseon made grand gestures to call a waiter saying that he was paying his round to celebrate that ! Clisthène asked to see the pictures again. She and Joseon got into a big discussion about the most urgent work to be done, about the customer prospecting that Clisthène wanted to participate in the next day, about this cute Felix who would join the team...

I was listening with one distracted ear. I, who had just been accepted as an academic, had just joined a grasshopper farm as a farm worker. I already felt like one of these insects was crawling up my right calf. I had a shivering reflex movement. Clisthène put her hand firmly on my forearm, to calm me down, without interrupting her conversation with Joseon. Nevertheless, I distinctly felt this species of grasshopper slipping under my pants. I put my hand under the table to chase the insect away and fall on Clisthène’s small, unshod foot. She glanced at me fleetingly as she looked up at the sky. In a split second, she picked up the thread of her questions to Joseon. She asked him if she could borrow his briefcase tomorrow, to try her luck in some bars she knew. Simultaneously, I felt Clisthène’s foot slipping and slowly coming back up. Petrified, I didn’t dare to move a millimeter. I discreetly checked that the tablecloth was long enough. I shivered from head to toe, concentrating on my immobility. I looked at my flashphone a little to give me some composure. A message from Gavriil was waiting for me :

“Watch out for your ‘friend’ the magician. I just checked him out on the web. He was elected to a four-year term on the board of a tracking center. Worse than a tracker, a *tracker’s boss*. A real invasive tyrant. I shouldn’t have left you alone with him. Be very discreet and beware of anything he might tell you. See you tonight at the Acad ?”

I suddenly realized how dangerous Clisthène’s involvement, based on a few photos, could be. I felt an anguish rising inside me. Unless it was something else. Clisthène continued to chat quietly with Joseon. But her toes were slipping up my pants. Her hand, which had taken my forearm, was clenching. I could feel her nails scratching me through my shirt. I had a brutal, violent, painful erection. Clisthène’ foot slowly reached its destination. It grazed as if to gauge, to measure. Clisthène gave me a satisfied glance as she sucked in a barely excessive gulp of air. Still impassive, she directed the conversation towards its end. They were exchanging contact information and setting up an appointment for the next day. Clisthène’s touching suddenly stopped. She was about to get up, to greet Joseon. I’d have to get up too.

In the shade of a mulberry tree

After evaluating potatoes, grasshoppers, cows, sedentary humans and migrant humans, I am caught up with the financial brigade.

In overalls, engrossed in thick rubber fishing waders, I walked into a deep pond where small water spiders were jumping and floating. A crust of greenish moss split as I passed. With each step, my foot sank into the mud, before coming out with a sucker noise. The spiders seemed to be growing in number, to the point that they gradually covered the whole surface. Suddenly I realized my mistake : I wasn't in a pond, but in a pile of grasshoppers. Thousands of leaping bugs are clinging to me. They were climbing me, jumping on my shoulders, in my hair. My efforts to escape only drive me deeper and deeper. And this swarming stream soon overwhelmed me. Thousands of hairy legs stick their tiny claws into my cheeks, my forehead. I closed my eyes as hard as I could. I stopped moving, stopped breathing. I could feel them slipping into my shirt, into my ears, into my nostrils. I would have liked to scream, but I didn't dare open my mouth. At the edge of suffocation, I twisted myself in every direction to try to get to the surface. Instead, I fell abruptly from the bed, into an indistinct mixture of sheet and blanket.

I needed a moment to get out of my nightmare. A voice echoed from the floor from below : "Nothing broken, Seb ?" I got out of the way and found myself on a floor of wide, poorly sanded and slightly disjointed slats. A smell of pollen and old dust brought me back to reality. I was in the middle of the countryside, in the old silkworm nursery bought by Joseon. My aches and pains, aggravated by my fall, painfully remind me of what I was doing there : I was renovating this place to house a grasshopper farm and a hoppie factory.

"Séb?"

That was Felix's voice. I'd gotten used to his potbellied but powerful mover physique, to his gray mane of dreadlocks and to his stiff beard that falls down and widens to cover his entire chest. I shout that "Everything's fine !". And I got back into bed, to stick my head in the pillow next to mine, Clithène's pillow. Her smell was still there, almost warm. I put on my dungarees, a T-shirt and, without taking the time to put on shoes, I went down to the kitchen in the hope that my beautiful abbess was still there. Felix was there, dipping a thick slice of bread covered with cheese in his coffee bowl. In front of him sat Joseon's two children. Chin-Sun was a teenage girl of about twelve years : her ironed jeans and blouse made her a model of sage girl ; her long black hair was tied in a ponytail with a blue-flowered silk ribbon. Kaourou was a six-year-old boy in Bermuda shorts with a large dragon drawn on his T-shirt. When they heard me coming down the stairs, the children pulled their noses out of their bowls of hot chocolate to greet me.

"Good morning Sebastian, slept well ?" asked Chin-Sun with her usual polite and serious tone.

"Hey there, exotic grandpa !" Kaourou launched me with a mischievous smile.

The first day, he had laughed a lot when he'd heard Clithène call me that. And, since then, he'd adopted me by that name. He was amused enough by it that I didn't mind.

I sat across from the kids, next to Felix. He looked at me, to check if everything was all right. He served me a big bowl of coffee, without saying anything.

“Clisthène ?” I asked.

“She went prospecting with Jos,” Felix replied. “About an hour ago. You were snoring hard.”

“And mommy’s gone to work too,” Chin-Sun added, so I didn’t forget anyone.

I shook my head to show the little one that the information had reached me, despite my half-sleep. I was disappointed I missed Clisthène. I swallowed a large gulp of clear but hot coffee. I grabbed the loaf of bread. I sliced a large piece of bread diagonally...

“The first delivery of locusts doesn’t arrive until early afternoon,” Felix informed me. “They’re running a little late. We rushed for nothing last night.”

“Bah,” I said, “at least the paddock’s ready.”

I was very happy for this little extra respite. I was apprehensive about the arrival of the bugs.

Under Félix’s direction, for almost a month now, I had been working as a mason-terrassier-electrician. In a hurry, we had worked last night until twenty-two o’clock so that everything would have been ready in the morning. It had to be said that following an enthusiastic plea from Clisthène, the date of arrival of the locusts had been brought much closer. Orders had been piling up and production must have begun as soon as possible. Our good resolutions to limit working hours had evaporated and the hours had been piling up. So much so that I had almost considered as a day off the round trip I had been making every week to the Affoué Kouad academy to give my course. The previous week, I had worked forty-eight hours on the farm, which was thirty-two hours of overtime... Since I didn’t really need immediate money, I had decided to put all the remuneration from these ‘extra hours’ in repayment of the company’s debt to the workers. At that rate, my share would have been paid back in less than a year. And if production took off as planned, the company should have quickly increased in value and my share of CoDeW with it. According to my calculations, I already owned 1,3 % of everything – land, buildings, hatchery and ovens that would soon be delivered... 1,3% may be negligible, but I had cut a branch of boxwood to make a cane and I had been walking around ‘our’ domain as a landowner. When our two sellers had come back to tell us about their commercial exploits, I had been happy about it as for an increase of my personal patrimony. Their curious system of worker’s association produced a pleasant feeling of rooting. Unless these impressions had come from Clisthène and the sunshine she was leaving me. Now a business traveler, she took advantage of her encounters and charms. But I’d learned to wait peacefully for her return, warmed by the memory of her last visit. Our occasional nights, tender and physical, had gradually dissolved my past as a paperwork lawyer, like a distant story, lived by another.

The kids got up to go to school. We walked them to the car. It was a small bubble model, with four seats arranged in a circle around a small table. Chin-Su programmed the addresses of their schools on the computer onboard ; Kaourou had already put on his virtual reality helmet. He turned his head quickly in all directions while executing small, precise and dry wrist movements. The car started itself. Chin-Sun sent kisses and made big goodbye gestures until the car was gone.

“We can take the morning off,” suggested Felix. “Either way, we’re ready.”

“I’d be happy to,” I said, sincerely tired from the efforts of the last few days.

We went out to sit at the foot of the huge mulberry tree next to the farm. With its large gnarled body covered with scars, it reminded us that these places were once devoted to silkworm rearing.

Sentiment, classification of the living and humanism

“A little joint ?” suggested Felix, leaning against the trunk.

I nodded while lying halfway down in the grass. The morning sun was already warm enough to make the spotted shade of the foliage pleasant. A cautious puff taken on the joint was not enough to relax me completely. I told Felix about my nightmare, trying to laugh about it.

“Still tense, the *Froggy*,” he said.

A great entomological traveler, Félix had traveled sufficiently throughout Europe to know the name the British gave to the French. He used it at first to make fun of my clumsiness as a handyman. With time, it had become an affectionate nickname that I no longer took offense to.

“You know,” I told him, “I’ve never dealt with locusts. It disgusts me, and I wonder if I’ll be able to...”

“Relax, listen to this silence...”

Leading by example, he took a big puff of smoke. I listened, slumping a little more on the grass, still wet.

“We hear the crickets,” I grumbled. “Even more locusts !”

“These are *Gryllus Harcanis*. A little more fleshy than your Southern European crickets and very edible. If you want, we’ll go hunting and, at noon, I’ll make you a fricassee, to get you used to them.”

I was pouting in disgust.

“What do you dislike so much about insects ?” Asked Félix attentive.

“I don’t know. It’s wiggling, it’s fidgeting, it’s sneaking around, and when it jumps on you, you don’t know where its paws or claws or teeth are. Besides, it stings, and it always looks more or less venomous.”

“And cows ? You’re afraid of cows , too?”

“Not at all.”

“Though, a cow is more dangerous than a cricket.”

“It’s not the point. Bugs are disgusting.”

“You prefer cows?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Obviously, they’re higher mammals — your cousin, the cow.”

“Talk for yourself ! With all the grass you smoke, you even chew a little bit, no?”

“Say what you want, but you’re closer to a cow than a bug. And do you eat beef?”

“Yes, I’m not a vegetarian.”

“And you don’t mind?”

“No, not at all. They’re cows.”

“And, on the other hand, eating bugs bothers you. Yet the cow has a brain, feelings, it’s a living being much closer to us than an insect. You should easily eat insects, rather than eating such an evolved mammal...”

“Everyone doesn’t have to be vegetarian like you.”

“But I’m not vegetarian ! Since I know that there is insect powder in most cereal flours, I gave up.”

“Even when Joseon made his beef *bulgogi*,” I reminded him, “you made no exception.”

“No mammal, no bird, no fish. That’s my rule. I, on the other hand, am a cruel insect-eater! And I also like spiders, especially hairy spiders, which tickle you when they slip on your tongue.”

“How awful !”

“Each one his tastes... and each one his political choices. Recognize that eating more bugs and less beef is politically preferable.

“Oh really ?”

“First, insects reproduce quickly, cheaply and without producing manure. It’s environmentally friendly protein. And then, even if you have preferences, as a human being you should respect more what is most like you. And therefore, prefer to eat insects rather than mammals.”

“Maybe, but I prefer beef. And I’m afraid of bugs.”

“Which will be here in a few hours.”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t know how to help you,” wondered Felix. “You could tell yourself that insects are sub-cows, because they are less complex animals, less sensitive, less intelligent... And since you eat cows, you could perhaps despise insects enough to trample them, to dismember them...”

“I don’t think so. I’ve seen children rip the legs and wings off live insects to play with. That was horrible !”

“It’s fine. You have a little compassion. Maybe you’re even disgusted with bugs *because* you’re not insensitive to them. You have some empathy with them. You assimilate a little bit with them, enough that your subconscious imagines itself with a shell, antennae and mandibles, swarming among a pile of your fellow creatures.”

“Hmm...”

“By the way, the proof is, you’re not disgusted by carrots or potatoes !”

“I don’t see the connection.”

“Your thing ‘I prefer potatoes to insects’, it’s benign. In the series ‘I prefer what’s further away from me’, I know some who are spoiled for a nice lovely ‘puppy’ and are disgusted by a beggar. That’s bad ! But it’s explainable : the more we assimilate, the harder it is to bear the difference. The grandmother who kisses her doggie, assimilates enough to empathize with it, but little enough not to be disgusted with its differences. Whereas she will be disgusted by the beggar..., to whom she assimilates much more, since he is a human like her.”

“Do you mean it’s okay to prefer dogs to wretched ?”

“Okay ? No. But it’s common. And it’s still disgusting ! We must respect what we are, which should lead us to respect more what is most like us. It’s more of a political choice than a sentimental one. In my opinion, we should prefer insects to potatoes, cows to insects, and especially humans to other animals.”

“With your logic of preference for what we are, since I’m French, I should prefer the French to the Germans or English ? Prefer Catholics to Muslims ? White people rather than black ?”

“No ! Of course not ! How awful...”

“You’re the one who said I owe more respect to the one thing that’s most like me.”

“Don’t do your smart guy ! The principle stops at the human being. All humans are equal. There’s no sorting. And especially not to favor the ones that are more like you.”

“You pose a ranking principle, ‘What looks like us...’ and, hop ! you stop it at the borders of humanity. Okay for me, but why ?”

“Human beings form a very homogeneous and very special species in all living things. Even if the progress of knowledge about animals has blurred a little what makes humans original, this originality itself is not disputable. Through our cognitive, linguistic, cultural capacities..., we are animals quite different from others and, at the same time, we are all very similar. To make a single category of all human beings is very rational.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t mean I can’t see differences between human beings. They don’t have to be biological differences. They may simply be cultural differences, differences of belief, education, wealth... In the end, I look more like a Frenchman from an intellectual socio-professional category than a poor peasant from Burkina.”

“You would be amazed at how much you have in common with a poor peasant from Burkina, as you say.”

“I don’t say otherwise. You’re just telling me to prefer what’s more like us. Obviously, basing preferences on skin color is just racist and stupid. But I could make a category of people who speak fluent French and love to dip their croissants in their coffee. And feel comfortable around them, because they look like me. Or I could quite easily prefer those who have the same kind of humor as me, or those who have the same musical tastes...”

“In practice, emotionally, you’re often going to prefer the ones that are most like you. But, ethically or politically, to say that you *should* prefer those who are most like you would be a horror.

“Maybe... But your naturalistic foundation, like ‘in truth we’re all alike’, you can keep it.”

“That human beings are alike, still, it helps to justify humanism.”

“Maybe, but it’s not enough. Humans are similar, but they’re also different. And the differences are noticeable. So what ? You say we should classify the living according to what is most like us, out of respect and empathy for who we are. But you don’t really explain why we should stop classifying when it comes to human beings.”

“In my opinion, humanism is a safety rule first. If people begin to put their clan, their co-religionists, their culture, before their common humanity, they will soon be killing each other. The human being is the only animal that seriously threatens us. That’s why we have to be kind to human beings, to *all* human beings. And to be kind to all human beings, we must start by not classifying them according to whether they are more or less like us.”

“Here we are, now it’s clearer. You’re a humanist because you’re afraid of man ! Original.”

“Humanism is the only doctrine that protects humans from themselves. It’s like the prohibition of murder, it’s a rule of survival.”

“You defend humanism like others defend the wearing of a condom.”

“Humanism is even a super condom,” Felix added, “because it protects against human barbarity, which is far worse than STDs.”

“Humanism out of fear of others..., by cowardice ?”

“To prefer peace to war is not cowardice, it’s wisdom.”

“If I’m with you, in the order of life, we should prefer what’s closest to us, and in humanity, we shouldn’t make distinctions... to protect ourselves, to stay covered. But already I can’t choose

insects over potatoes, if I have to love all human beings, it's going to be hard. For example, I prefer Clisthène !”

“One can see that !”

“And then it's forbidden ?”

“Of course not. You have more feeling, empathy, compassion for some people than others. It's only natural. It's the basis of human relationships. Loved ones, family... and not just from somewhere else. Look, I, for example, I've been really burdened by the death of Joseph Lee. Even though I didn't even know him personally.”

“Joseph Lee ?”

“You don't know him ? He was a sublime raggarage singer. His death really depressed me..., more than the thousands who died in Ebola and even more than the hundreds of thousands who died in Syria.”

“You loved his music. She made you feel. So you empathized with him a lot. Maybe you even fantasized about him. His disappearance created a void in your sentimental world, while you may not know any Syrians.”

“That's right,” agreed Felix, “I don't distribute my sympathy or compassion very fairly. The death of a single singer, whom I liked... saddens me more than thousands of deaths.”

“Hmm... for now, it's so natural it's gotta be normal ? I remember that when *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoonists were murdered in France, I was very sad, really, for weeks..., much sadder than when I learned that thousands of Africans had drowned in the Mediterranean, trying to reach Europe. And besides, almost everyone in France reacted as I did.”

“And then ? You're proud of prioritizing your emotions like that ?”

“No. All I know is that my emotions just came over me like that. And like so many others. Besides, I subscribed to *Charlie Hebdo*, in solidarity... while I didn't give anything for the migrants.”

“You see... When it comes to prioritizing our generosity, our feelings have funny consequences. Our emotions allow for beautiful impulses of solidarity..., perfectly unfair. Imagine, if we tried to base a political regime on our petty sentimental preferences, it would soon be a disaster. Giving equal value to human beings is not a spontaneous feeling, nor is it natural. Nor is it a sentiment. It may not even be a truth. Human beings would be both very diverse and truly equal, a quality that always makes up for an equivalent defect ? It's rather unlikely, isn't it ? The equal value of all human individuals is neither a feeling nor a truth. It is a rule. And not just any rule : it's the super-condom ! It's perhaps *the* most essential rule of all. The one that underlies all the others.”

“Not easy to enforce if it goes against our feelings.”

“It isn't so hard, either. We do have a certain natural empathy for our fellow human beings. And we can choose to foster that sentimentality.”

“You think we can choose our sentiments ?” I asked ironically. “But that would be too easy ! Well, if I have a choice, I rationally decide to have as many feelings for bugs as for potatoes. And hop ! All this deep-fried ! No need to feel sorry for yourself. It'd be more convenient to work on that damn farm.”

“Obviously, it's not that simple...”

“By the way, I come to think of it, we're not gonna throw live locusts in the oven, are we?”

“Yes and no. Actually, we're gonna refrigerate them first. It puts them to sleep completely. Then they spend 15 seconds in the first oven at 400 degrees. They'll be seized and cooked long

before they wake up. No animal suffering... It's part of the specifications if we're going organic. Don't worry about that."

"I prefer. But even so..."

"Don't worry too much, though. You'll get used to it. After you've cooked a few cases, you'll have left behind a lot of your empathy, and therefore your disgust. Humans are very capable of self-persuading themselves, of standing up for themselves. With a bit of willpower and a bit of practice... In fact, that's perhaps how he exercises his freedom best. For better... or worse. Even in relation to other human beings, some manage to suppress any sense of assimilation, any empathy. A small physical, cultural or religious difference is enough for them. They focus on it and that's it. It becomes possible for them to wage war on each other, to massacre each other, or even to organize genocide."

"And your humanism...?"

"It too, it can get stronger with a little willpower, practice, and habits. That's one of the reasons why we do child swapping. Have you heard of it?"

"Yes. I can see why you're organizing them. But it mustn't be enough."

"There is also all the devices that help individuals to achieve themselves," added Felix. "When a person no longer has an individual perspective, when their hopes fade away, when their desires become nothing more than frustrations, it's hard. So, rather than suffer too much, they prefer to strengthen their identification drives. They'll forget themselves and blend into something that's worthwhile. And they will be able to forget the sufferings of their shrunken, shriveled life, and enjoy the grandeur of the thing, of the group they have chosen to identify with. Take me, for example, when I'm not doing well, I take an interest in the results of the football team in my home district... It's nice, especially when it wins, of course."

"And then? What's comforting doesn't hurt. A little collective warmth, even if it's fantasized, it's not forbidden."

"Sure not! Moreover, the fundamental misarchist norms are humanistic, but they don't forbid extecs, families, or all groupings, including by philosophical or even religious affinity... With their assimilation impulses, people love to be with those who resemble them. It comforts them in who they are. But it's like weeds — he crushes its butt -, you mustn't abuse it. It's cool to identify with Superman when you see him in the movies. But if you think you're really Superman, that's a big deal. So when you identify with a group (an extec, a district, a sect) you have to curb your hallucinations... and keep a small personal perspective. It's much healthier. Besides, giving importance to one's individual specificity is the only way to relate directly to humanity. And it's also the only way to respect others, despite their differences and despite our ugly tendency to hate the differences of those we most assimilate to. And respect for others, in misarchy, is really crucial."

"You are moralists."

"If you want, but then minimalist moralists, since our only real taboo is intolerance. Having said that, you are right: it's a taboo, it's a hell of a taboo! But we are fortunate to have it, aren't we?"

I remembered my legal problems not yet totally solved, with the story of the vicious old lady and her two teenagers. Indeed, they did not joke about the issue of respect that was due to all. Even though they may be riding mechanics, it must have its limits, their respect... I decided to test it a bit.

On the reception of migrants

“You must have some issues with strangers,” I said... “I mean with your newcomers. These are people whose language and culture may be quite different from yours. They haven’t had the childhood swaps. You must have a hard time integrating them, assimilating them.”

“Integrate ? Assimilate ? To what? To mankind ?”

“I don’t know. To the misarchist thought? They come with their prejudices...”

“True. Some even form extec, where they try to rebuild their habits. As long as they’re not assaulting other lifestyles, I don’t see where there could be a problem. On the contrary, it helps us to have diversity. And the more there is, the more efficient our child swapping is.”

I was trying to take the question through another angle :

“I imagine you must have some sort of border control. You can’t accept all newcomers.”

“Well, I don’t see why we could forbid people from going wherever they want.”

“Not any limit ?”

“We can shut down private homes... But not streets ! Much less an entire district.”

“With this kind of ideas, you must have all the refugees in the world who arrive ! That must be a terrible problem, no ?”

“Here you are right ! Population displacement is always a problem. A very serious problem even.”

“Ah ! You admit that !”

“Yes. It’s terrible ! The countries our newcomers come from are losing their most dynamic inhabitants. We are not proud to take the human wealth of others in this way.”

“But this influx of newcomers must also pose problems in Arcania,” I insisted ; “at least in terms of housing, organization...”

“The settling of newcomers is not always easy. Some WOAR occupied by newcomers are insufficiently equipped. They’re a disgrace to Arcania, if you ask me.”

“WOAR ?”

“Wild occupation areas. These are areas where...”

“Ah yes, I know,” I interrupted, remembering the kind of slum I went through downtown.

“Fortunately, this transitional period is usually short. And, for those who wish, there are always Cheap hotel seats available. It’s a little spartan, of course. But, with the arrival allowance, one can hold out long enough. And fortunately there are newcomers to make the Cheap a social mix and a dynamic place to live. Leaving the *no-life* and addicts alone could quickly lock them into some kind of ghetto...”

My arrival, the arrival allowance that was given to me and my first shelter with its Cheap and Cosy rooms were coming back to my memory.

“With the arrival allowance, the funding of Cheap rooms and whatever else,” I noted, “it must be costing you a fortune to take in all these newcomers.”

“Sums devoted to the reception of migrant populations are quickly recovered. Immigrants are people who have been able to leave everything, sometimes going through terrible hardships, to

change their lives. That is quite a selection. The energy it takes to migrate... We welcome the energy of those who have nothing to lose and everything to build. We owe them an important part of our wealth. In fact, if you look at history, you will see that it is the countries of immigration that have always concentrated the world's wealth."

"Unless it was to the countries where the world's wealth was concentrated where the poor went. A chicken-and-egg problem?"

"Wait, I remember reading about it in the history books..."

He rummaged through his flashphone and, pointing to his screen with a smile, he went on :

"They cite some examples that you must know : the wealth of Syracuse, populated by Greek settlers who had emigrated ; the free cities of the Middle Ages, open to all the winds to allow them to develop ; the United States, built on the energy of migrants fleeing misery, sometimes famine... They say that the famine in Ireland was an opportunity for America. There's even a French example, for you : they say that Paris, your capital, shone as never before between the 18th and 19th centuries, when the miserable people of central France took refuge there and its population exploded."

"Hmm..."

"Nowadays, you know, Arcania's almost the only country open. Thanks to the xenophobia and idiocy of our neighbors, we are pumping some of the world's energy. It's nothing to be proud of. Our immigrants are a loss to the countries they come from. But what to do about it ? Altruism has its limits. We are not going to close our doors to the human wealth that comes to us. Fortunately, some immigrants send money back to their country of origin to help their families back home. This allows for some development assistance to these countries. That is always the case. That is what we tell ourselves, to clear our conscience."

"Your immigration must produce some unemployment, all the same ? Look at me. I even took two jobs, one here and a part-time job at the academy."

"You have a job and a half, but you had to mobilize at least five Arcanians to take care of you. Net profit for Arcania : three jobs and a half !"

"Very funny..."

"Seriously, one more person is one more worker, one more job offer. But it is also a need, a demand for more work. We have to balance it out."

"You can't deny that immigrants arrive with their habit of misery, and their energy as you say. They're a competition for local workers."

"The latter knowing the languages, the customs, having a better education..."

"Immigrants work for less."

"In the limit of the minimum wage! And in tough jobs, a little cheap labor is not a disaster. It enriches the consumers who benefit from it. It's a win-win situation for everyone. Not to mention that immigrants often don't hesitate to work a lot of overtime, just like you. So they pay a lot of taxes. All in all, Arcania benefits from being open... — he's digging on his flashphone. — And besides, it's commonplace. It seems that in almost every country, even the most xenophobic, immigration is an economic gain, even in the relatively short term."

"I hadn't thought of it that way..."

"By the way, if we could split up the work a little bit more, it wouldn't hurt. We're still at sixteen hours a week, whereas with our productivity gains, we should be at twelve hours. A twelve-hour work week would be reasonable !"

"You say that, but we've been working like mules for the last few days."

“Obviously, we’re putting our business together. And by the way, you’re complaining, but you weren’t the last one to support Clisthène when she asked to shrink all the delays. If we’d done things quietly...”

“I don’t feel sorry for me. Clisthène convinced me.”

“Sure if she wanted to convince me, I wouldn’t complain, either...”

He thoughtfully hung his big paw in his beard.

“It’s alright here,” whispered to me Felix. “But, honestly, maybe it’s a little too lonely for a guy like me, coming alone. I’d have to spend some time prospecting for clients.”

“Female clients ?”

“Correct.”

We remained silent for a few moments. Felix pulled out his flashphone and plunged into his messages. I imitated him. On my French inbox, which I have finally installed on my flashphone, the flow was building up, discouraging. I was distractedly flipping through the list of the last messages that arrived to check that no nuclear cataclysm had eradicated my whole family. All this seemed to me to come from another space-time, abstract, imaginary. I wrote an impromptu note to my wife about the daunting progress of the Sydney conference, where I was supposed to have arrived. The exercise amused me. It was all so far away that it seemed virtual. I quickly moved on to my Arcanian inbox.

I was quite proud to receive some very concrete news. Rosin, my attorney, was giving me my court date. He’d asked for it to be postponed until the 9th of Frimaire, to give me more time to acclimatize. A glance at the calendar transposition table showed me that it was in two months. A draft pleading was attached. I opened it with curiosity. It was essentially the description of the individual I was when I arrived in Arcania : a disoriented, grotesque character, so out of touch with the world he was in that he seemed to be outside of myself. The pleading made me look ridiculous, but my attitude was presented as excusable. The testimony of these young adults suggested that they were perfectly willing. I was not sure what to make of that. I responded by accepting his offer to meet with him in three weeks. As I was sending the message, I realized that I was not even thinking of going back.

Gavriil was also checking up on me. I met him regularly at the academy and, each time, I had to assure him that I was very careful with this terrible tracker that was Joseon. When I thought that I hadn’t even dared to ask anyone about the trackers. As if it was better not to talk about it. I took a look at Felix, plunged in his messages... We were both quiet, maybe it was the right time ? But he was caught up in writing a message that seemed to become as long as a novel. I didn’t dare interrupt him. I open Danái’s messages : since I was an ‘academic’, I was on her mailing list and she was sending two or three messages a day. One of the messages was announcing :

“Electoral-Electro at AKA !

Hyper party Octidi 12 Thermidor !

Greatest celebration (or consolation ?) at the academy (Celebration courtyard). Sublime weather awaited to welcome the no less sublime and no less expected *results of the elections in Alterbriie*.

Burning polls. Hot results, Hot !

Come accompanied, in moderation, as usual ;) !

For the Board of Directors : Danái ! ”

Octidi 12 was in about ten days. I was thinking of Felix and his willingness to go out and explore potential ‘customers’.

I showed him the note and offered him to come to the party with me.

“AKA ?” He asked. “What’s that ?”

“It’s an acronym for my academy. You know, the Affoué Kouad Academy. So ?”

“I don’t know... this could be a chance to see you loosen up a little. Given your skills as a mason, I’m guessing you’re more comfortable with your nerd *trip*.”

I’d take that as a compliment. I’d take this opportunity to ask him:

“I don’t get it all in the message... Alterbriie ? What’s that ?”

“It’s an East Afric-Asian country. You don’t know it ?”

I looked at the map on the flashphone. Actually, I did. But, with their weirdly named atlas, I couldn’t recognize the ***.

“And so ?” I asked. “What’s going on over there ?”

“You don’t follow the news ?”

“Since I’m here, I’ll tell you what...”

“All the newspapers are talking about it. Imagine ! A capitalist country that could switch to misarchy !”

“What do you mean ?”

“Alterbriie has long been one of the most advanced countries. More than half of its economy is made up of cooperatives or workers’ associations. And many districts are managed in an almost misarchist way. Did you know that this is one of the first countries to have had directorates since the thirteenth century?

“Oh really ?” I was surprised.

“All cities have squares and parks that have been turned into free occupation zones. For almost a year they have been doing it every Monday : it is a kind of weekly general strike, with demonstrations, carnivals and banquets. And the misarchist coalition, leading in the polls, has decided to run for the first time in the national elections. Until now, they had only run in local elections where they could make a real difference. But they didn’t want to run for central power, for fear of becoming a party like the others. But now they are going, because they can win. And if they win, it’s going to be a big wave. Drowning the capitalo system !”

“Really ?”

“Anyway, it’s possible. As you know, on the world stage, what dominates are pseudo-democratic capitalos, at best. Because with the rise of authoritarian military or religious regimes..., Arcania is so isolated that in the Overwest, it seems that information doesn’t even filter through about our existence !”

“I confirm. It’s pretty amazing, by the way.”

“Yes indeed. So if the Alterbriie falls on our side, that can change. And we could build joint districts. It could even be the beginning of a contagion... We can always dream, can’t we ?”

“Yes, yes...”

I found myself feeling a benevolent curiosity towards this Alterbriie that could have tipped over. I still didn’t really know what I thought of their misarchist system. But there was something exciting about the prospect of its expansion. I was probably too much influenced by all these people.

“Make me see your message again,” asked Felix.

He looked at my flashphone and thought.

“Sure on election night in Alterbriie it might be worth it to be a little less isolated than here.”

“So,” I asked, “will you come ?”

“Okay ! I’d love to. Thank you for the offer.”

He slapped my hand. I was proud to have invited someone like Felix. Now I was the one doing the social networking in Arcania !

“They are nice, the people from your academy?” Felix asked me.

I agreed, describing to him, without details, Affoué, Danái, Gavriíl... I preferred to tell him right away that Joseon and Gavriíl didn’t really get along. They even had had a little fight.

“Oh really ?” Was astonished Felix. “Joseon is so nice, so calm. It’s hard to imagine anyone arguing with a guy like that.”

“Gavriíl is a good friend,” I said, “but sometimes he gets a little stiff. He blamed Joseon for being a tracker.”

“Ah, that’s right. I see. I see. Your Gavriíl isn’t the only one who’s wary of trackers. But we need them, don’t we?”

“Uh... Yes, I guess so. But I have to admit, I’m having a little trouble understanding.”

Trackers and financial flow control

“What would you like to know ?” Asked Felix.

“On the one hand, you have a system that seems pretty free. I mean, people seem to be able to do pretty much what they want. And, on the other hand, you don’t have any cash, everything is registered, controlled. And those great trackers... they have access to everything, correct ?”

-”Yes,” confirmed Felix, “that’s it.”

“It’s a little disturbing, though.”

“You’re right... Giving away that kind of power is dangerous. Power makes you megalomaniac, greedy, scornful. Even Joseon, who’s a really zen guy, would have cracked eventually. With his years of coaching, he still did eight years. That’s the maximum length of time. He ended up shaken, with serious technocratic impulses. All the trackers already have some after four years. So, you see, around us, the calm, the countryside, the forest of fumens, it’s not really a coincidence. You can’t imagine anything more opposed to the world of trackers. Joseon may have been damaged by his tracker years, but he’s healing. You have to admit, he’s healing himself.”

“Okay, but is this total control of the financial flows necessary ?”

“The natural tendency of people is to always want more power, to use their power to acquire more. Human beings are insatiable.”

“Justly so ! We must not give them weapons as powerful as total control on financial flows !”

“The problem is that, to block the power of one, you need the power of another. Power is an evil that can only be fought by itself. To criticize the means of control of misarchy, such as trackers or biometric, it is not enough to say that they are means of domination. It must be demonstrated that, *among the means of domination*, which are indispensable for the establishment of effective counter-powers, these means are less good than others, or more dangerous than others.”

“Indeed, and other modalities of power might be softer than your ‘Big Brother’ biometric...”

“Why not ? Which ones ? All means of power are scary, you know. Violence, the threat of violence, dumbing down, training, fear, greed... What to favor ? The preference in Arcania for financial transparency is a choice : it is an effective way to fight against the power of money.”

“But it could get out of hand...”

“It’s the whole point of using evil to cure evil. We have to be very careful that the cure is not worse than the disease. We have, of course, a whole list of limits and controls that aim to frame the power of trackers.”

“Such as ?”

“Their functions are also time-limited. One can only be elected tracker, in principle, four years in a lifetime. And to become a tracker for another four years, like Joseon, you need some serious guarantees. Their functions are also limited in scope. They inform, but have no police or prosecutor powers of their own : they work with police officers from other districts.

In addition, the trackers are divided into several independent districts, which recruit with very different criteria. In particular, there is one district that recruits young people through competitive examinations and pays the winners very well, which makes the competition selective and

very difficult. Those who pass are mostly young adult, well-educated from childhood onward, and therefore tend to come from higher social or intellectual categories. Another district is made up of people who have demonstrated their integrity and seriousness during their career. They are mostly old people from the lower social classes. And, quite unfairly, if you ask me, they are paid less than young people. So I can tell you that these two districts are unlikely to get along. They hate each others ! Each of the two groups is, of course, in charge of watching the other. You see, by playing on the psychology of the powerful, it's not so hard to limit them. So, the trackers are being seriously tracked. They are tracked before they are hired, during the performance of their duties, and again for several years after their duties are over."

"I see, the 'Big Brother' side of your trackers has turned against them."

"It's also forbidden for a tracker to investigate anyone they know directly or indirectly. If, in the course of an investigation, a tracker comes across a natural person who has had financial links with him, even indirectly, the computer is immediately blocked and another tracker must take over. The computer will also freeze if the network of financial relationships to a more distant degree reaches a certain density threshold."

"Okay, but if the big file gets into the wrong hands. Creating a database like this is still a risk. For example, if a fascist army conquers Arcania and falls on this database..."

"There are five copies of the database, each kept in a tracking center with no network connection. In the event of an external threat, these five copies are automatically destroyed. It's our very own atomic bomb. If the base is destroyed, it's not only the books that disappear, but also the currency and the identities of the people."

"True, you don't have any ID"

"Not even a civil status ! Once the database is destroyed, our conquerors will be plunged into a chaos very conducive to resistance."

"Okay, but without going to such extremes, there's got to be some risk of leakage, data hacking..."

"Databases are only accessible from the computers made available to the trackers, after serious biometric checks of their users. I'm not saying the system is tamper-proof, but it's solid. Two years ago, there was a scandal of a tracker that sold data on the consumption habits of its customers to a commercial company. The case ended with the client company being put into a district."

"Put into a district ?"

"In a WA, the decision-makers are the workers. In a district, its the users. The district expropriates the workers from their voting rights, and puts them under the supervision of elected and drawn consumers."

"In the Overwest, the trade in information on consumer habits is fairly free."

"What ? How horrible ! You were worried about the power of trackers and you have traders of personal data?"

"It's not so bad. It simply allows for targeted advertising..."

"Advertising propaganda? And targeted! I can't believe you were worried about the power of the trackers."

"If they are so nice your trackers," I let go of me, "I wonder why so many people hate them."

"But luckily there are people to hate them ! Excellent reflex ! No misarchy without mistrust of the powerful individuals !"

I couldn't find an answer to that. Especially since Felix stood up, as if motivated by our conversation.

"Come on," he invited me, "it's almost noon already. Let's have a last little tour of the facilities before the arrival of bugs?"

We walked along the farm to a large, relatively flat, poorly cleared field. Sturdy metal hoops, about five meters in diameter, were sealed to the ground and lined up for more than five hundred meters. They were covered with a thin wire mesh, as the insects' mandibles are capable of destroying any plastic – this information terrified me in its time. The wire mesh was shining in the sun and making the whole thing look like a huge snake of light. I remarked this to Felix.

"You are under the protection of the snake-keeper," he replied, smiling. "You no longer have anything to fear from insects!"

I'd try to remember that when the locusts would come.

Revolution

An ounce of gratuitousness, a few compromises, some hope and, finally, the big leap. Where I learned how to cobble together a path to misarchy.

The weather was fine and the latest polls in Alterbrié were optimistic. The party was looking good. We were expecting a lot of people. Bergþór had agreed to reunite his former steam metal band and a small overflow of old fans was planned. It was not really my style of music, but I was curious to see how Bergþór was doing on stage.

I walked through the academy's cottage village, greeting here and there the familiar faces of colleagues and students. I was beginning to feel quite well integrated into the academy. I was a bit worried about the idea of crossing this little world with the people I'd invited. Besides Felix, Clisthène, Joseon and his family, there would be Josuah, the kid who ran the hotel in Nehushtân. I looked forward to their reaction when they would see some of my students greeting me with respect. Those who knew me when I had arrived in Arcania would be able to measure my progress of integration. All the more so as here I was meeting with a certain success. My original audience, composed of ethnologists, had grown to include piracy students, which gave me an audience of respectable size. The discussions organized during my courses had enabled me to deepen my knowledge of Arcania considerably. I recognized that the inventiveness of this people had allowed some interesting advances. But I was beginning to perceive the limits of their misarchy. Their system was far from ideal, and for some time now I had been convinced that it was possible to do better. I even had some ideas. But, before submitting them to my students, I had asked Affoué to test them with her.

Affoué welcomed me, as usual, with steaming tea on the table. Her horse-headed steamer was, for once, extinguished. It had been replaced by a bar of tarragon chocolate, open on the table. We sat in her spacious leather armchairs. I grabbed a square of chocolate while she serves tea. On a sign from her, I began by praising the efforts of the misarchy to reduce economic inequality and its far better situation than that of the OECD countries. She interrupted me quickly :

“But ?”

“But economic inequalities are far from having disappeared in Arcania,” I said. “I have seen rich people earning ten times and even twenty times more than the poorest. I have already come across three beggars in less than two months. And your economic inequalities generate, as everywhere, all kinds of domination and dependencies.”

“And you have any ideas on how to improve things ?”

“I've got two simple ideas I'd like your opinion on.”

“I'm listening.”

What's free and what's subsidized

"The first idea would be to make all the essentials free," I suggested.

"As the Smurfs ?"

"Seriously, I was wondering if..."

"I got it. Free stuff on all the essentials isn't a bad idea, Séb. Besides, it works very well within small solidarity communities, within families, in some extec and even in some small communes. On the other hand, on the scale of Arcania, if we want to avoid wastage, it is more difficult. It would be necessary to set limits and therefore organize a certain rationing. This would mean giving very significant power to the people responsible for setting the nature and quantity of rations..."

"I see the risk. But charging for essential goods leads to depriving the poorest of them."

"For this reason, some essential goods are free of charge, but only for those that are difficult to abuse, such as education, health, computer connections, etc. For other essential goods, we have decided to content ourselves with subsidizing them. This is the case of hotels in Cheap, for example. The beneficiary pays little, but he pays for his accommodation and food."

"Indeed, very good example ! You could very well have decided to give the Cheap's away for free. Free accommodation and meals would ensure the right to housing and the right to healthy and adequate food."

"Maybe... But leaving some of the cost to the user has great psychological benefits. If the user pays, he considers his room and food as compensation for the amount he pays, even if it is much less than the actual cost. He considers himself to be a customer. And the hotel manager, who is paid according to the number of guests he has, is also inclined to be respectful. The subsidy, however large, leaves the idea of cost intact. It creates a useful illusion of balance. You must have tested it in the Overwest too ? Surely you must have some goods subsidized ?"

"Correct. For example, the cost of public transport in Paris is covered at 60 % by public funds. The cost of metro tickets and season tickets only covers about 40 % of the real price."

"And do the travelers feel assisted ? They thank when they come across public agents ?"

"Oh no ! They think the subway ticket is too expensive. And, if the transport is late, they are furious. They've paid their fare, their season ticket..."

"Here it is ! That's exactly right. The psychology of the consumer is such that he quickly forgets about the subsidy. As soon as he pays a substantial part of the cost of the service, he is no longer seen as beholden to the benevolence of others. He is no longer in a position of inferiority. That's the thing ! Assist, but discreetly. The customer, even assisted, remains king."

"I have another example," I nodded after I thought for a moment. "In France, operas are heavily subsidized, so people who go to the opera pay only half of what they would pay for their seats if they had to cover the full cost of the performance. And yet, opera lovers do not consider themselves to be audience members at all. Rather, they feel that they have acquired a luxurious, elitist property at a high price. If they feel anything, it's a certain sense of superiority. Which is paradoxical for assisted people."

“That’s it ! The idea is to create assistance, without creating assisted. The subsidized person is demanding like a customer and is perceived as such. Therefore, he is treated better.”

“It’s true that in your Cheap, I was, overall, very well received. I imagine that if they were free, the rooms would be infamous and the users abused.”

“You see, between free and normal price, subsidy is sometimes a good compromise.”

“I understand the logic. But the risk remains of depriving some people of basic necessities. Which leads me to my second idea to further reduce your persistent inequalities.”

“And what’s your idea ?”

Denial of universal income

“You should automatically give everyone a good level of income, the same for everyone. This is an idea that is quite widespread in Europe and has even begun to be applied.”

“I fully understands the appeal of this idea, believe it or not,” approved Affoué. “In the 1950s, the misarchy had even adopted it !”

“And then ?”

“It was financially burdensome. In particular, free health and education services had to be significantly reduced. Moreover, paying the rich and middle classes a regular sum of money before taking it back from them in the form of taxes did not simplify accounts or tax collection. However, this is not why universal income was abandoned.”

“Then why?”

“Tax collecting districts had become ubiquitous. And the decacilor of the distributing districts were beginning to see themselves as world-masters : they demanded the ability to modulate the payment of taxes to encourage the most marginalized, the most out of place people to join the system. This would have given them a very worrying power.”

“You just had to resist them !”

“Indeed. And that is not why universal income was abandoned either.”

“So ?”

“Universal income was draining a large share of the country’s wealth and this was significantly reducing net labor compensation.”

“So nobody wanted to work anymore ?”

“It’s not that. Even for a little extra, many people are happy to work. But on these low wages, it had become very difficult to repay the CoDeW shares. The influence of creditors and holders of *golden shares* was increasing all the time.”

“But the idea of universal income also has its advantages. The right to income frees people from the obligation to work. And workers can safely leave their jobs whenever they want. The subordination is no longer the same under such conditions.”

“It’s what we’d hoped for. But it wasn’t much of a success. People became addicted to their little extras earned through work. And since it had become almost impossible for them to gain access to power in their companies, the opposite has happened. There was a real fear of capitalism returning. It was serious. But it wasn’t enough to abandon universal income.”

“So, what happened then ?”

“Universal income made it costly to open Arcania to all. Some poor newcomers were refused entry. It was a humanitarian villainy and an economic catastrophe for our country. But you know how selfish people are. That’s not even why the system was abandoned.”

“Stop this little game and tell me why you gave it up.”

“Universal income has gradually created a terrible rift in society. On the one hand, there were those who had productive and solvent jobs, who were called the ‘workers’ and, on the other hand, those who were content with universal income, who were stigmatized as the ‘annuitants’. And

there was relatively little rotation from one category to the other. Detached from work and its constraints, annuitants remained annuitants. Addicted to their extra pay, the workers remained workers. And, between the two categories, the tension was mounting. The workers treated the annuitants as profiteers. They started to protest around with signs saying ‘Stop Volunteering’. Major strikes led to increases in real wages... and corresponding decreases in universal income. Gradually, universal income became an income of relative misery. And the ‘annuitants’ were perceived as being assisted and discredited. Finally, the payment of the allowance to all had lost its virtuous egalitarian effects. It was decided, as a simplification measure and to limit the tax burden, that only those in need would benefit from the ‘universal income’. It thus became a simple subsistence income.”

“We have one in France, which we call the RSA. But, according to my students, you don’t even have that subsistence income anymore!”

“This income kept the people who lived on it in positions of misery and great inferiority. It was as if they were receiving some kind of charity from the community. It seemed terrible to us that these positions of inferiority would continue to exist.”

“You cut off subsistence income and reduced people to begging for fear of the unhealthy effects of charity ?”

“Even if this subsistence income was low, it allowed a population not to work at all, producing significant addiction effects. It seemed to us that it was better for everyone to have an incentive to work.”

“I see. You’ve recycled the old saying : ‘Everyone has a duty to work...’ Begging serves to punish your bums. It’s hypermoralistic.

“Maybe... But encouraging people to accept at least eight hours of work a week had many advantages : fighting against social disconnection, encouraging addicts and *no-life* to get out into the real world, giving those on the margins a social usefulness, promoting autonomy... As long as we need work, work and workers can only be valued. And, conversely, there is a risk of devaluing those who live on subsistence income. Sharing work is better than simply sharing income.

“Again an old saying : ‘Idleness is the mother of all vices’.”

“This is not our doctrine at all! As you know, our working hours are reasonable — well, especially compared to the dramatic situations that exist in the Overwest. Full-time at sixteen hours a week has been encouraged to favor ‘idleness’, as you say, but part-time idleness. Sounds like an acceptable compromise to me. The lack of free time is a horror, but the total absence of recognized and paid work can produce a sense of confinement or uselessness that is also not a very enviable situation.”

“To incite working, at the risk of letting people starve and die in the cold ?”

“You exaggerate : in practice, everybody gets by. Those who are unable to work, either physically or mentally, receive an income related to their disability. And those who escape the offers of work from street educators and labor exchanges get by with the usual monthly payment of donations. In addition, the Cheap always offers its residents the opportunity to do a few hours of cleaning, which is enough to pay the clients’ share of the cost of the Cheap. In short, our beggars get by. But it is still more difficult to earn an income by begging than by simply taking a small job at the Labor Exchange. That’s the idea, by the way.”

“All that assumes there’s work to be done.”

“Obviously. If there were a real problem of unemployment in Arcania, we would be forced to return to a minimum subsistence income, despite all the dangers of this system.”

“So, you admit that in some cases, a French-style minimum income may be a better solution.”

“In situations like the ones you experience in the Overwest, it seems inevitable. Moreover, with your minimum income, you have certainly suppressed all begging. I agree that this is a good thing.”

I nodded my head thoughtfully, without answering. I did not really want to tell her that our RSA was conditioned, that its beneficiaries have to continually prove that they are deserving, that it involves filling out cumbersome applications, that many people who should benefit from it do not ask for it, that it only allows for a very miserable life, that illegal aliens are excluded from it, and that, in the end, we have many more beggars and misery than they do at home. I preferred to take advantage of my argumentative victory.

“I’m glad you recognize the merits of our RSA,” I said, “at least in the French context.”

“Of course ! And even in misarchy, the lack of subsistence income is really a matter of debate. In fact, all the rules of misarchy are debatable. Do you know the story of the three monks, the wise man and the snail ?”

“No. What is it about ?”

Approximation and compromise

“A short zen story : two monks were walking peacefully. One of them inadvertently was about to walk on a snail. His companion stopped him just in time and showed him the animal. He reminded him of the value of life and congratulated himself for having had the reflex to avoid this useless death. The first, displeased to have been pushed, opposed the salads destroyed by the snails, the value of the vegetable garden and the work of the brothers. He demanded the right to crush the snails and was about to do so. At the strength of the arguments and hearing the rising tone, a third monk intervened. He suggested bringing the dispute before their master. The first monk intervened in the name of the vegetable garden, work and subsistence of the community. The wise man reflected for a few moments, then he answered : ‘Yes... Yes, you are absolutely right.’ The second monk explained his position based on respect for life. The wise man reflected for a few moments and then he answered : ‘Yes... Yes, you are absolutely right.’ The third monk intervened in his turn, reminding all that he was in no way a party to the quarrel, but noted that the answers were perfectly contradictory. The wise man reflected for a few moments, then he answered : ‘Yes... Yes, you are absolutely right.’ ”

“That’s fun !”

“Who seeks a just rule must, like the great wise man of the story, begin by recognizing that all are right and all contradict each other. But that’s just a starting point. We cannot order the snails to be crushed and, at the same time, saved. The monk legislator must continue his work. But in order to overcome contradiction, he must give up the search for truth. He must take the path of compromise and approximation. He will try, for example, to protect the vegetable garden with repellents, or he will place snail traps in a few strategic places. We, to protect the academy’s vegetable garden, first used alcohol-free beer, in which slugs drown. Then we set up a colony of hedgehogs, because they gorge themselves on slugs... But that doesn’t satisfy some of the greener ones, who say we delegated the massacre. It also doesn’t satisfy some of the less green ones, who were in favor of more expeditious solutions to eradicate the slugs. This is a short-term and entirely questionable compromise. It reflects all the major rules of our misarchist legal system.

For example, our system aims to allow everyone to freely develop their own existence and, therefore, we defend a certain individualism. But individuals assimilate to each other, even to collectives, and they appreciate being surrounded by their fellow human beings. All community groupings are therefore allowed, even those that may seem a little extremist, as in some extec. However, again, in the name of protecting peace and individual freedom, we have nevertheless set certain size limits for extec and we have imposed some fundamentals on them.”

“And to reduce the strength of community affiliations,” I said, “you also have the child swapping.”

“Which are imperative — despite the strength we otherwise recognize in individual freedom. Another compromise. And we can continue the list :

We fear violence from the police and prisons, but we also fear violence from individuals, and even from criminal groups ; so we have kept the police and prisons, while trying in various ways to minimize their importance, dangers and slippage.

We fear the power and oppression of states, but we appreciate some free services financed by taxes. A certain compromise has been reached by maintaining free services, but removing the state in favor of a plurality of districts and the clear separation of collecting districts, funding districts and service providers.

We fear bureaucracies, their heaviness and their despotic tendencies. Therefore, whenever possible, our free or subsidized services are carried out by independent, competitive providers. This is the case for lawyers, for education..."

"Yes, I saw that," I nodded. "In France, this system exists a bit too. Despite the fact that medicines are almost free, we have preferred a network of private pharmacies to the creation of public dispensaries for free medicines."

"Of course, it isn't possible for everything. We only have one district that provides Internet connection. A single network is much more efficient and much cheaper."

"Completely agreed," I approved, without mentioning the European rules which prohibit the establishment of such a public service.

"If we come back to the organization of studies, we wish freedom of training paths..., but we also appreciate equality and we believe that a common knowledge base is necessary for mutual understanding. Therefore, even though in principle everyone chooses their own subjects for further training, we have set out some fundamentals that everyone must acquire in order to access higher levels of education."

"I have talked a lot, especially with Bergþór, about your property right, autonomous, life-bounded and fading..., but there are some exceptions, even in the case of heritage ! And I have studied your companies, your WAs with GS, which are a compromise that protects free enterprise, rewards the dynamism of entrepreneurs, but abolishes capitalism and democratizes companies."

"Excellent examples ! Here, another : we do not believe in the effectiveness of pseudo-laws of supply and demand to set prices, but we fear just as much, perhaps even more so, the authoritarian setting of prices by an authority. So, in principle, we let companies set their own prices, which is like letting the market do its own thing, even if it is inefficient. But we have all sorts of corrective mechanisms. For example, we encourage negotiations between users' or consumers' associations and producers' associations, particularly when there are too few players on one side or when spontaneous negotiations are too unbalanced."

"I see, you're tinkering."

"Exactly. All our rules are approximate, imperfect. They're all questionable, debatable compromises."

"So we can do better ?"

"Of course ! Even much better ! Your ideas of universal income or generalized gratuity are not the most convincing, but there are many others. You should go to Amogh. He's one of our best tinkers with normative perspectives. He'll tell you all the ideas he has for improving misarchy. Some of them are extraordinary."

"Amogh ?" I asked curious. "Who is he ? Where can I find him ?"

"It's very easy. He lives in the third chalet on the left, the one with the sky blue shutters. I have recruited him ! Go see him and you'll be amazed... by me ! You'll see that I'm the best at

attracting great minds to my academy. Because he is certainly one of the greatest minds of our time.”

“You... You think I can go find him like that ? Now ?”

“I don’t know if he’s in his cabin or if he’s available. But you can always try...”

Outside, the cottage village was bathed in a new atmosphere. The air had taken on a pungent, adventurous flavor. I took advantage of it by slowly, thoughtfully crossing the two hundred or so meters that separated me from the cottage with the blue shutters. Except for the color of its shutters, this one was similar to the others. A bit of dry moss clang to the joints of the stones that formed the ground floor. The second floor, made of fire-blackened planks, was topped with the thick, traditional thatched roof of the academy. I hesitated, then timidly shook the entrance bell. No answer. Taking my courage in both hands, I shook harder. Still no answer. I was in no hurry and decided to wait at the door.

Finding myself there, motionless, contemplative, Gavriíl called me :

“What the hell are you doing, Séb? Looking for some sleep ? You’re brooding ?”

“Hi Gavriíl,” I answered, “I’m waiting for Mr. Amogh.”

“Amogh ? Yeah, I saw his file go through the committee. He just joined us. A big, fat guy. He’s gonna take the academy to a whole new level of notoriety. We’re gonna have to build more cabins. Affoué even intends to propose that we rename the academy and call it ‘academy Amogh & Kouad’. But hey, I’m suspicious. I hear he’s got some crazy theories.”

“That’s why I’m waiting for him.”

“You may be waiting here for a long time. With the organization of the party, he was probably requisitioned to help out, like the others. Besides, you, rather than waiting for him here like a picket, you’d better imitate him and make yourself useful. Come and help me.”

I followed him, not without a look of regret towards the house of Amogh.

The firefighter company from the neighboring district was raising the stage and sound system slightly away from the academy. The freshly sheared sheep meadow would be the dance floor. A little further away still, three large fires had been lit in three trenches, with a view to hanging two sheep and a wild boar on spit. Gavriíl and I were part of the team responsible for transforming the central square into a projection and banquet hall.

A giant screen had been set up at one end of the central square so that the results of the elections in Alterbrié could be followed live. Large tables on trestles had already been set up everywhere and students were covering them with white paper tablecloths. Gavriíl and I were in charge of arranging the garlands of multicolored lanterns. There were boxes full of them and we hung them everywhere – on the chalets, across the square... As we were going to rest to admire our work, we were requisitioned again to help carry large blocks of ice for the bar. A little tired, before being called to another task, we tried out with Gavriíl the draught beer that had just been pierced, watching colleagues continue the work. Some were setting up chairs, placing candle jars on tables... The sun was still high, but a few guests had been called in early to make salads and kebabs.

A dry old man approached our table. He was wearing a loose shirt over tired jeans, traditional kinds of thick leather barefoot, thin and distinguished glasses that soften his look. His long, white, carefully combed hair was knotted in the back in a ponytail. He held a vase filled with a bouquet

of herbs and wild flowers. The word 'bouquet' was a bit strong to designate this heap of plants put in bulk, randomly, without harmony or aesthetics. He placed his vase on the table. I was a little surprised that we let him do it. I understood the respect owed to everyone and the open-mindedness, but I was afraid that if everyone did random thing, our efforts to prepare a beautiful party would be a bit wasted. He took a couple of steps away, came back, moved a few herbs around a little bit, without changing anything, but he seemed satisfied. He greeted us politely from the head and prepared to walk away. He glanced at me. I had the unpleasant impression that this man was seeing behind my forehead, in my head. I was suddenly very embarrassed to have thought so badly of his bouquet. I was about to apologize to him, but he interrupted me by putting his wrinkled hand on my arm :

"Never apologize yourself for your pleasures. Just keep an open mind to other pleasures, Sébastien. Can I call you Sébastien ?"

I was nodding yes, totally taken aback.

"But," I said, "how..."

"Affoué said you were looking for me. Nice to meet you. I'm Amogh."

"Mr Amogh," I say surprised. "Uh... yes, indeed."

So he's the great man praised by Affoué ? Of course, why not ?

"Nice to meet you too," I said.

"You wanted to ask me something ?"

"Affoué told me you're working on improving the rules of misarchy, and I'm very interested."

"Me too, I'm passionate about it."

"If you could just give me a couple of ideas, a couple of principles, a few leads. It would help me think."

"Sure, I'd love to. Just now, as you can see, I've been put in charge of making the bouquets. We could make an appointment. Unless you want to help me? We could converse while we're picking up some flowers ?"

"With pleasure," I said immediately. "Certainly."

I took a look at Gavriíl. He signaled to me that, for his part, he was fine with a beer.

Beyond Misarchy

Amogh and I were walking away at the peaceful speed of his footsteps. With his hand, he showed me a nearby hill.

“Columbines and bellflowers are over there,” he explained.

We walked a little bit in silence. Then, as we approached the goal, he asked me in a deep voice

:

“So, what do you want to know ?”

“Affoué told me you had some ideas on how to improve the misarchist system.”

“True. I’ve been thinking about this for about 50 years now. Time flies.”

“So you could tell me a little bit about some of your findings..”

“There’s a lot to talk about. Misarchy is a charming system; I imagine it can only fascinate someone like you, who comes from across the Overwest. But, you see, the misarchist system is still childish, primitive.”

“Maybe with an example,” I suggested, “I could begin to understand..”

“Of course ! Why not ? In my opinion, $\sqrt{2}$ $\sqrt{3}$ $\sqrt{4}$ $\sqrt{5}$ $\sqrt{6}$ $\sqrt{7}$!”

“Excuse me,” I said, “but if you could repeat it slowly, I couldn’t quite hear you.”

“ $\sqrt{2}$, $\sqrt{3}$ $\sqrt{4}$ $\sqrt{5}$ $\sqrt{6}$ $\sqrt{7}$ $\sqrt{8}$. Amazing, isn’t it ? What do you think of that ?”

“Uh, maybe, of course. But some words escaped me. Maybe they come from a language I don’t know?”

“It’s just English ! You understand English, don’t you ?”

“Yes, yes, absolutely,” I agreed.

“It may be clearer with other words. One could simply say that $\sqrt{2}$ $\sqrt{3}$, $\sqrt{4}$ $\sqrt{5}$ $\sqrt{6}$ $\sqrt{7}$.”

“I... yes... probably.”

“If I had to summarize the principles of a society built for the human being with respect for the life that surrounds him, I would say : $\sqrt{2}$ $\sqrt{3}$ $\sqrt{4}$ $\sqrt{5}$, $\sqrt{6}$! $\sqrt{7}$ $\sqrt{8}$ $\sqrt{9}$. Clever, no ? What do you say about that?”

“Uh... maybe..”

“ $\sqrt{2}$ $\sqrt{3}$,” he added ; “ $\sqrt{4}$ $\sqrt{5}$! Ha Ha !”

He was laughing heartily. I imitated him by puffing.

“It’s a good one,” I attempted.

“But, more seriously,” he went on ; “ $\sqrt{2}$ $\sqrt{3}$ $\sqrt{4}$ $\sqrt{5}$ $\sqrt{6}$ $\sqrt{7}$ $\sqrt{8}$ $\sqrt{9}$. And, as I told you, $\sqrt{2}$ $\sqrt{3}$.”

His gaze wandered off into the distance. He remained pensive for a moment and in a small childish voice, he added :

“ $\sqrt{2}$ $\sqrt{3}$ $\sqrt{4}$ $\sqrt{5}$ $\sqrt{6}$ $\sqrt{7}$ $\sqrt{8}$ $\sqrt{9}$...”

I was nodding my head, concentrating. He continued, a little sad, with a hand gesture that seemed to encompass the entire surrounding countryside:

“ $\sqrt{2}$ $\sqrt{3}$. That is why I think it is better to use $\sqrt{2}$. $\sqrt{3}$ $\sqrt{4}$, $\sqrt{5}$ $\sqrt{6}$, $\sqrt{7}$ $\sqrt{8}$. Don’t you think ?”

“It’s hard,” I said just in case. “I don’t know.”

His monologue punctuated by my risky remarks went on like this, without me making any real progress. We arrived in a large meadow covered with wildflowers. He invited me to pick only a few flowers here and there, to let the others ripen. We filled a basket with all the colors and scents, while he continued to explain his system to me, slowly, pedagogically, going back over the same things several times. I nodded my head, I agreed ; sometimes I asked to repeat. But I didn't understand anything !

On the way back, his basket full of flowers under his arm, Amogh stopped for a moment. He put his old hand on my shoulder and said, very gently :

“Maybe the misarchy is still too new for you to conceive of the next step.”

“It must be this,” I recognized, sorry.

“Get used a little more to our world and come back to me. In a few months or a few years, maybe. It'll be easier.”

Back in the central square, I left him to the meticulous making of his skillful bouquets, not without having thanked him at length for this mysterious lesson.

How to go to misarchy

As night falls, the space gradually filled up with colorful figures. Excited and cheerful groups wandered in all directions, in the noise of the meetings, punctuated here and there with loud optimistic shouts : “Misarchist one day, misarchist forever !” ; “ E Viva l’Alterbriúe !” Almost all were convinced that the confirmation of the polls, favorable to the misarchist coalition, will be forthcoming. The central square, where the giant screen and projection equipment were located, was beginning to run out of chairs. But I had no news of Felix, Joseon or, above all, Clisthène. I was starting to worry. Gavriíl and Danái had lured Affoué and two of her friends to our table. A few of my students’ pirate apprentices joined us, as well as a small group of teenagers who had been extended the invitation by Josuah, my former landlord. Elbowing each other, we managed to monopolize a large table, perfectly placed in front of the screen, on which we placed beers, wine, a large jar of the fresh fruit cocktail prepared by Gavriíl, two bottles of Coke and various snacks. Contrary to the general atmosphere, Affoué pulled nervously on her horse-headed vaporizer, worried, tense.

“We are as far as we can go,” she explained to justify her nervousness. “That’s good enough. But from the possible to the realized, there is still a world. And this world is the most terrible of all.”

The special program of the seventh channel of Alterbriúe, the only one in this country still capitalist to be favorable to misarchy, was shown live. The first estimates of the results were expected soon, at eight o’clock. The banquet and the party were supposed to start right afterwards.

On the screen, Alterbriúe’s minister of the Interior made a serious speech about the need to maintain order, whatever the results. He promised rigor and severity.

“How sad he is!” Someone launched. “He probably already knows he has lost...”

The remark triggered a round of applause. The minister, all wrinkled and jowls drooping, was effectively liquefied.

“What is it, a minister of the Interior ?” asked Josuah.

“It’s right under the great tyrannical leader,” said Fatima, one of my top students in piracy. “A deputy chief in charge of police, prisons and violence against citizen. Not to be confused with the Minister of the Armies, in charge of heavy violence, which is normally reserved for people from other countries.”

I confirmed her explanations with a nod of my head and congratulated her with my eyes. Estéban, another of my students, precised :

“In the worst cases, armies are repressing the people.”

“Let’s hope that the army will stay in its barracks,” Gavriíl whispered gravely.

Alterbriúe’s minister of the Interior addressed the demonstrators who had gathered around the ‘free zones’. These areas were public squares, parks and vacant lots, occupied by misarchist movements in the heart of cities, sometimes for several years. He asked the people present in these areas to remain grouped and static. In this way, he made sure that he would not be held re-

sponsible for anything in case of overflow. The program showed battalions of policemen trotting around in their riot gear, taking up positions.

All the place was booing and shouting :

“Houuuu ! Ca-pi-ta-los ! Pa-le-os !”

On the screen, a disheveled commentator explained that police units were heading towards most of the free areas. He added, confident, that it didn't matter, because the street were ours and that if the elections gave victory to the great misarchist coalition, millions of people would take to the streets and the forces of the capitulo state would be overwhelmed. He was warmly acclaimed by the whole of the academy square.

“It's really amazing,” said Fatima, my pirate student. “Tribune Sora Sanpors may become ‘President of the Republic’ ; for a misarchist, it's a joke. ‘President’ ! and ‘of the Republic’ !”

“And if this is confirmed,” said Gavriil, “there should be a majority of ‘deputies’ elected with her: misarchists in clothes of pseudo-democrat despots!”

“Elections are contricks !” Shouted someone.

“In these half-democracies,” replied Affoué, “there can be no misarchist revolution without winning electoral legitimacy. An armed coup can overthrow half-democracy, but it leads to despotism, not misarchy.”

“But elections can also create a new caste of notables, eager to seize power,” Gavriil objected.

“For sure,” nodded Affoué. “But in order to overcome the legitimacy of the ballot box, we must first conquer the ballot box. It is necessary. Although, of course, it is not enough. It's not a handful of elected officials who can make a difference. Misarchy is always the result of social, popular, economic, intellectual and even cultural movements...”

“But elected officials can betray,” Gavriil protested. “They will soon be corrupted by the power and...”

“We don't care,” interrupted Fatima. “If the election is won, it's a general strike and everyone into the streets ! The newly elected officials can't betray, even if they wanted to. The platform will have to be respected. And in a hundred days, the misarchy will be established !”

“In anycase, the capitolos are going to rig the results,” launched a deep voice. “Ah ! *fucking bastards* !”

“Alterbríe is an ancient half-democracy,” one of my students told him. “They don't vote much, but they are used to respecting their results. Their capitolos won't dare to fall into tyrannos.”

It carried the optimistic approval of the majority of the table. But the tension was at its height. The presenter interviewed a young woman, who told why, along with most of the Black Blocks, she had joined the order service of the misarchist coalition. But I found it difficult to follow what she said, in the hubbub of the conversations in the central square. It seemed to me she was explaining the means implemented to secure the occupied squares and prevent looting when the results would be announced. I listened, trying to understand, when, suddenly, a cry rang out :

“Séb! Séb!”

It was the voice of Clithène piercing through the tumult. I looked in all directions, in vain. Suddenly, I saw her elbowing her way towards us. I responded to her signs with great movements of my arms. She was hilarious. As soon as she was within range, she jumped into my arms and hugged me with all her strength. Out of breath, she explained :

“Joseon sent me the results in advance.” Then she shouted to the whole table : “That's it ! It's done ! 58 % ! Exit poll. Irreversible !”

“But,” I said, “what about the tv?”

“They are not allowed to say before the polls close, but it’s done. We won !”

Silence was falling all around us. We asked her to repeat. She pushed the glasses and bottles, climbed up on the table and, with her lungs full to cover the surrounding hubbub, she shouted :
“58 % for the misarchyyy !”

She raised her arms to heaven in a thunderous cheer. Everybody stood up, applauded. We heard shouts : “Long live freedom!” ; “Long live Alterbriie !” ; “Long live the world revolution !” We toasted, we hugged, here and there old Arcanian revolutionary songs were sung. I just heard is a skeptic grumble : “As long that we don’t have the official results, we’re not sure of anything...” But his voice was covered by the thunder of victorious exclamations and laughter. Gavriil, standing on a chair, shouted even louder than the others. Josuah and his friends got up and danced, clapping their hands.

“Come quick !” Clisthène told me as she dragged me by the arm. “We’re going to launch the concert !”

On the sheep meadow, a few hundred people were already sitting around the stage. They were following the election night on their flashphone, waiting for the concert. Bergþór, sitting on the stage with his feet in the air, did the same. Some musicians were tuning their instruments. Clisthène had run faster than me : I saw her jumping on Bergþór’s neck and saying something to him, very quickly. It was like a big squirt from adrenaline : he jumped out of his box like the devil and rushed to the microphone. After a short feedback, his voice resounded powerfully amplified: “We have the results ahead of time : 58 % ! Alterbriie is a misarchy!” In the tumult that started immediately, he chanted : “Al-Ter-BRIÍE ! Mi-Sar-Chy ! Al-Ter-BRIÍE ! Mi-Sar-Chy !” He shook his left fist and walked across the stage like a caged lion. Gradually he was carried away in a thunderous, brutal and joyful rock thunder, and started to sing in a hoarse, slightly raspy, but gut-ripping voice.

I stood still, impressed. I had known that he had had some success as a steam metal singer, but to imagine my dear colleague capable of such a performance...

Clisthène twirled and jumped around. She slipped in among the firemen who climbed up the stage. Subjugated, they look at her and clap their hands. Wrapped in the storm of her black hair, she was radiating sensuality and raw energy. I tried not to stay too far away from her, to join the dance. I moved my legs and shoulders as best I can, concentrating on the rhythm. I felt like a frog stirring in the sand. It was best that Clisthène didn’t see me like this for too long. I tried to wave to her, to tell her I was going back to the central square. But, bewitched by her dance, she didn’t see me anymore. I had to wait until the end of the piece to attract her attention and she gave me my exit voucher with a quick hand gesture. I walked away, repelled by the dancers and the music which had become furious again.

Relieved to escape the hysteria, I tried to go for a beer, waiting for Clisthène to join me. On the way, I saw Felix, still in overalls, with Joseon’s two children, Chin-Sun, the young girl who was so well looked after, and the kid Kaourou. “Did you see that?” Asked me Félix with wet eyes, showing me his flashphone. The official results were on his screen : 57,5 % for the misarchist coalition.

“I got the results a little early, from Clisthène,” I told him.

“Me too, ten minutes ago,” he said very emotional, before hugging me.

Chin-Sun and Kaourou came to kiss me. I felt like I, too, had won a great victory. Félix explained to me that they had only just arrived, that Joseon and his wife would not come, that they left for Alterbriie yesterday.

“You know,” he explained, “Joseon, before he was a magician-farmer, he was...”

“Yes,” I interrupted him, “a tracker...”

“That’s right. And maybe a little bit more than that. And Mbissine, his wife, in my opinion, is worse. I mean, I don’t know exactly. But they were called in to help out there. The next few weeks are going to be hot and the external affairs district has sent security advisers, including Joseon. And me, you see, I’ve been demoted to super babysitter and substitute cake dad.”

“Dady hash rather,” proposed Kaourou.

“Well,” continued Felix without paying attention, “you know where we can sit down to feed the crowd and smoke a little joint ?”

I made them take a little detour to get directly to the back of the central square. This one was animated by laughter and exclamations. Large dishes of strange salads, cups of big, filthy red insects, but also tabbouleh, rice salad and various grilled meats covered the tables among carafes, bottles and cutlery. Everywhere people were toasting, brandishing chicken thighs, patting each other on the back. The chairs that had been carefully arranged were overwhelmed by the events and moved around. Here and there, guests sat on tables or on the floor, around a picnic. The better-off were swaggering around on a few large leather armchairs that came out of nowhere. I spotted a few seats left available at Affoué’s table, with Gavriíl, Josuah and a few of their friends still glued to the screen,. We tried to make our way to them. A woman in a sari asked me to sit down so as not to obstruct the view. We hurried back to our table.

On the screen, the images were shaky, chaotic. A journalist was trying to follow a group of a few hundred fast young people, who sometimes walked at breakneck speed and sometimes started running. Most of them had their faces masked with full face helmets, carnival masks or simple scarves on their noses. Here and there, a few iron bars could be seen. Some members of the group seemed slightly injured. The breathless journalist commented : “I am in contact with a group of ultras, as there are hundreds across the country. They have just entered Nyilleu, one of the most posh areas of Koyr. They have already passed two police roadblocks.”

Affoué noted that they crossed those roadblocks a little too easily. According to her, the cops were letting them through to discredit the coalition. Gavriíl was not agreeing at all : he thought the people’s anger was just and irresistible. The group walked through a beautiful neighborhood of opulent villas, vaguely Italian in architecture, served by meticulously paved alleys lined with boxwood and cypress trees. Everything here seemed to breathe peace, order and luxury. The demonstrators slowed down, intimidated by the place. A shout put an end to this temporary hesitation : “Death to the exploiters !” As if re-electrified, the crowd picked up speed. They chanted : “Capitalos ! Tyrannos ! You ain’t going to last long !” A few shouts rose from the group : “To death !” The group, brandishing iron bars and sticks, headed straight for a villa more imposing than the others, framed by falsely medieval towers decorated with rococo gargoyles.

The journalist said it was one of the main homes of Carlos Garladère, known as ‘Slim Bill’ — one of Alterbrié’s ten biggest capitalos. A trembling zoom showed some silhouettes on the first floor of the house. The journalist got excited at his micro : “Yes. I think it’s Mr. Garladère himself ; but yes, that’s him.” On the screen appeared three men in civilian clothes, guarding the entrance. They looked frightened. One of them had a gun in his hand. He shot three times in the air. This triggered a wave of anger and shouting among the demonstrators. The three guards entered the house. This withdrawal movement was like a trigger : all of a sudden, the whole mass of people gathered together rushed like a wave towards the villa. In an instant, the windows were blown out with iron bars. Another shot was fired, followed by a scream. The mass of demonstrators was

so dense that you couldn't make out much of it anymore. The commentator was both frightened and excited.

All of a sudden we heard a concert of horns and sirens. The camera was pointed at the origin of this hubbub : two outdated pickups and a kind of Volkswagen kombi-van, covered with flowers painted in the style of the 1960s, were driving at high speed, right in front of the crowd. The crowd moved away sharply. One of the pickups almost ran over a demonstrator in a squealing of tires. The sirens made a terrible noise. The villa's attackers, taken aback, stop, however, when about twenty people hurriedly get out of the vehicles. There are people of all ages, sexes and haircuts, but they are all wearing T-shirts and armbands with written : 'Comi' on them. The strongest of this group vigorously open a passage. In a few minutes, the members of the security service, firmly attached to each other by their crossed arms, form a human cordon that separates the demonstrators from the villa. The bullhorn on the roof of the Volkswagen kombi-van cabin firmly ordered the demonstrators to step back and stop all aggression and violence.

The crowd was hesitating. A demonstrator shouted out to cover the hubbub : "Here we are, the assholes are defending patrons !" He triggered a murmur of approval among the protesters. One of them showed his bloody arm and shrieked : "Bosses! Assassins!" The slogan was immediately taken up again. But the human barrier that had been erected held the crowd in respect. The bullhorn of the van shouted : "There are no more bosses. The dominant properties are repealed and the monopolists will be dispossessed and punished. But in justice and by common law. Together, let's protect the revolution and all the..." The megaphone was covered by the slogans of the crowd : "Bosses! A-ssa-sins!" and "Death to the exploiters !", which were faster and more powerful. Iron bars and sticks were brandished in a threatening way.

All of a sudden, a small, overexcited demonstrator, perched on the shoulders of a sort of colossus, cried out. She pointed to a spot a few meters from the villa. The camera immediately zoomed in on this direction : there was a group of a few frightened people surrounded by a dozen members of the security service, recognizable by their T-shirts. The commentator was overexcited : "You are finding out at the same time as I do, dear spectators ; the misarchist order service is helping Slim Bill and his family to leave the villa."

The reporter wasn't the only one who understood. A small group of activists, detached from the group of protesters, rushed towards the fugitives. However, the escapees barely managed to slip into one of the pickups, which started up immediately. At the same time, the human cordon of the security service turned into a line that trotted off to fill the remaining kombi and pickup. The crowd watched them leave without moving, but the assault on the villa resumed immediately. The villa was quickly ripped open and looted. Some of the demonstrators came out with their arms full of loot. Thick smoke came out of one of the windows. In a few minutes, the crowd of rioters was dispersed, while the fire spread throughout the villa.

Gavriil was wholeheartedly with the rioters :

"They have been asking for it, these capitalos. They wanted more, always more. It's growing and growing and boom !"

"That's blowing up at their own face !" shouted Josuah of the same opinion. "Hurrah ! Long live the revolution !"

Other guests at our table seemed rather devastated. I heard Affoué whispering at a colleague : "How idiots ! But how idiots !" in a frightened tone, and this one answered : "Fortunately that the OS have been able to intervene."

The sequence was interrupted by a return to the studios. A presenter announced that the headquarters of the country's major banks were occupied. He would come back to the events as soon as possible, but he proposed to interrupt the sequence to follow live the speech to be made by Sora Sanpors, tribune of the misarchist coalition.

The screen showed a small, skinny, Hispanic-looking woman in her fifties. She climbed onto the stage in a room overheated by cheers. Her size forced her to climb on a stool to reach the lectern and the microphone. With a wave of her hand, she obtained silence. Her voice was solemn.

"First results confirm the important victory of our misarchist coalition."

These first words triggered a thunderous round of applause and shouting. Sora Sanpors finally got silence again and continued :

"This day is the first of a new era. It must be a day of joy... A day of joy ! And not a day of mourning" – her voice got deep and firm. – Across the country there are a few disorderly groups attacking the properties and people of the capitalist ruling class. I solemnly call on all misarchists, in the name of our movement and in the name of our victory, to stop and stop all violence. The wealthy who oppressed the people are today losing their political and economic strength. Their time is over. Let justice do its work and let our resentments not threaten peace. I thank the activists and the forces of law and order who have today deployed throughout Alterbriie and who are working to restore and strengthen this common peace. I call on the ultras to stop the unrest that threatens our victory and to join the misarchist law enforcement agencies in order to prevent the capitalist provocateurs from sowing chaos.

This night, as soon as the final results are known, we will proceed with the drawing of lots for the Assembly of a Thousand, responsible for adopting our fundamentals, alongside the now-elected National Assembly. From tomorrow, the dominant properties will be abolished and users and tenants will become full owners. I call on the workers to draw lots and elect as soon as possible the assemblies and leaders of their productive associations. I call for full respect for the maximum *golden shares*, which are by right granted to entrepreneurs. From tomorrow, the founding assemblies of the Great Common Fund, the Central Fund and the Security districts will be drawn by lot and elections will be held to build their assemblies. I call on all the municipalities of Alterbriie to do the same. Above all, I call for respect for all and for all opinions.

About 43 % of our citizens voted against our movement today. These citizens have never been our enemies. Today, they're not even our opponents anymore. Through misarchy, power will be handed over to them, as it will be to all. They are the inhabitants of our districts, the members of our associations. They are our brothers and sisters, equal and free. Their differences and opinions will be respected everywhere, as will all differences and opinions. Capitalist exploitation and the nation-state will disappear, with security for all. Today, I do not thank those who voted for us, because they voted for them. My thanks go firstly to the coalition's law enforcement agencies and to police forces, deployed throughout Alterbriie to maintain the rule of law. They are and will be our first line of defense against the reactionary militias and capitalist mafias. Long live freedom ! Long live equality ! Long live the misarchist revolution!"

The speech was acclaimed on screen ; it is applauded more modestly in the academy courtyard.

"She supports the cops ?" let go Gavriíl astonished. "She did say that she supports the cops ?"

"Roughly, yes," I nodded. "It's a little weird, no ?" I asked, turning to Affoué.

"Excellent. Excellent discourse !" She approved.

"What ? Long live the cops ? Excellent ?" exclaimed Gavriíl.

"But of course yes," an annoyed Affoué retorted. "Do you think it's time to mug police ?"

“The police of Alterbrié ?” Gavriíl reacted. “But they’re stick twirlers. It’s not by flattering the first of the reactionary threats...”

“And the rioters ?” answered Affoué even more irritated. “You think they’re not a threat ? You think they’re going to spread the spirit of tolerance by fire and mutual respect through pillage ? The first emergency is to calm down the riots and take control of the military and police forces. Do you think that if the army revolts, the misarchist activists will hold ? And even if they do, do you want a civil war ?”

“Obviously... but it’s not by burning down a few villas...,” Gavriíl began.

“Me,” interrupted Josuah, “I’m glad they’re burning these villas ! It teaches these capitalos about life!”

“Naughty boy,” launched Affoué smiling, “of course it feels good. Me too, I enjoy it, what do you think ?”

Josuah and Gavriíl looked at her, astonished at the turnaround. But Affoué continued:

“For personal choices, fun is a very good guide. But for political choices, it is better to give in to reason than to pleasure. And only peace is reasonable.”

“We must have a little fun doing the revolution, no ?” suggested Kaourou.

“A little, but not too much,” explained Affoué.

Meanwhile, television changed the subject. There was a debate between some members of the misarchist coalition and representatives of other parties, defenders of what some commentators already called the old regime. One of the day’s losers, a dynamic man in his forties, in an impeccable suit, was trying to look good:

“As we could see it in these pictures and as we announced, what is happening is a disaster for our country. An outpouring of savagery!”

“Sir, how dare you !” replied an old woman, at least eighty years old, but with sparkling eyes. “You know very well that with our tribune, we have all condemned these excesses. As we speak, some of our activists are heroically risking their lives to restore calm as quickly as possible. And, except for a few isolated outbursts...”

“It’s the apocalypse ! Replied the man in the suit. Look!” he said, brandishing his smartphone, “look at the markets. All Alterbriían stocks listed abroad are plunging. Here ! Look at the stock exchanges of New York, London, Euronext... It’s collapse ! Tomorrow, at the opening of the Alterbrié stock exchange, I don’t even dare to imagine what will happen. In comparison, the crashes of 1929 and 2008 are a joke. In fact, your victory had already been anticipated by markets : our Alterbriían values have lost more than half of their value. By the end of the week, our stock market will have lost nine-tenths of its value, maybe more...”

“Hurrah !” Said a young misarchist in a t-shirt sitting across from him. “The value of the capital is collapsing ! With its only breath, the misarchy decapitates finance !”

“You are irresponsible !” Replied the man in the suit. “The destruction in one day of hundreds of billions, and your fading pseudo-property will produce a collapse in real estate prices. You’re gonna cause the worst deflation on history !”

“This collapse of the dummy value of capital is a necessity,” the old lady smiled. “But I reassure you, this disappearing value is not the disappearance of real property. Buildings, machines, shops, factories, nothing is destroyed. It is virtual value that disappears. I concede that this virtual value is necessary. But nothing is easier than to recreate virtual value. Milton Friedman, your ultracapitalist guru himself, used to say that to fight deflation, all you had to do was throw banknotes by helicopter. We are going to abolish paper money, but we are not afraid of ‘helicopter money’.”

“You’re talking nonsense ! It’s absurd !”

“In clear, we will simply replace the value that disappeared on the stock market or the real estate market with other values. We have a whole series of measures in preparation that will inflate the money supply in circulation and calm your deflationary concerns. Putting in place the free core services will involve significant expenditures funded by our large banking district. This district will have a mandate to massively reduce the debts incurred by individuals. To encourage the transition to fading property, most real estate loans will be automatically eliminated. As you can see, the loss in value suffered by those who have played the financial markets will be matched by a gain for individuals. And our money supply will remain stable. Especially since we will have to rely on the compensation due to the former dominant owners. And these compensations will take place, because we want to ensure that no one is robbed.”

“What a joke ! We are not fooled. No one is ! You’re going to set up a puppet ‘buying back’, at a low price, after the stock market crashes with the entire value of the capital. This is a theft ! Actually, that’s what your program is all about. Your so-called indemnified ‘dominant’ properties and your so-called ‘autonomous’ properties are just pretense ! What you want to do is pull off the biggest heist of all time. And the property owners you’re going to rob, ma’am, are Alterbriens, just like you and me.”

“No freedom and equality when a handful of hoarders steal everything ! Long live the sharing of wealth !” Said the young man in the T-shirt.

“Dominant property rights are about to disappear,” confirmed the woman with a smile. “But, as I told you, fair and prior compensation will be paid to former dominant owners. The capitalist shareholders will lose their voting rights, of course, but they will retain a claim on their former companies, which have become workers’ companies. With the help of our banking district, these workers’ companies will thus gradually have to compensate them for their loss. To use your language, I would say that the old shares will become bonds — bonds to which we are even considering granting a partial guarantee from our banking district. This is a transfer, not a spoliation.”

“You are stealing the right to vote from the shareholders !”

“It seems to us that it was the capitalists’ right to vote that was a theft of workers’ autonomy.”

“You are playing with words ! And by the way, at what price do you claim to value these news ‘bonds’ ?”

“For listed companies, according to their market value.”

“Which has collapsed ! And which is about to go down to nearly zero !”

“Don’t you believe in regulatory market power ? Well, let the markets regulate themselves and set the new capital value. Anyway, it would have been impossible to pay the capitalists the absurd speculative value of their assets. Lower real estate prices will also make it possible to buy back dominant properties at a reasonable price. For companies, the solution will, of course, be different depending on whether the owner is one of the workers in the company or not. The worker-owners will be considered as founders and protected through the allocation of maximum *golden shares*. The small bosses will thus retain full management of their companies for ten to twenty years. We are not waging war on entrepreneurs.”

“You have no idea of the international implications. Alterbriie’s companies are not isolated, do you know ? We don’t live on a desert island! Our large companies are part of international groups.”

“The advantage of a workers’ association is that only its workers vote. A foreign trading company is not a natural person, so it cannot work, so it can never vote in a misarchist workers’ association. With the advent of misarchy, the influence of your international groups is dissolved.”

“And so all of our overseas subsidiaries are going to be lost...”

“We do not change the laws of other countries, dear sir. Only workers can vote in our workers’ associations. But that does not mean that our associations cannot hold shares in foreign corporations. We do not have the power to prohibit subordination and capitalism outside our borders. And if our workers’ companies want to operate abroad, in the capitalist form, they will not be prohibited from doing so. It is not our intention to prohibit piracy.”

“Thieves and pirates ! It’s beautiful, the misarchy !”

The moderator intervened to interrupt the debate. The President of the Alterbrián Republic was about to take the floor.

A dark man in a strict suit, with dark circles around his eyes, appeared on the screen. He slowly crossed the room, as if he were climbing the scaffold. The conscientious applause of an acquired audience did not comfort him. He started :

“Alterbriáns, my fellow citizens.

The latest results we have received confirm the important advance of the Misarchist Coalition. I would like to note, however, that this lead is significantly smaller than previously announced in some polls. Our effective campaign has therefore borne fruit. This is only a limited defeat, which we acknowledge tonight...”

The whole central square of the academy applauded, which covered for a few moments the words spoken. When calm returned, the rest of the speech becomes audible :

“... the safety of property and people. In these dark hours, I ask our fellow citizens to be patient. The chaos and misery that will descend upon our country will be short-lived. For, I would like to remind our adversaries that they have pledged to hand over all their mandates in one hundred days. And they have pledged to hold elections and draw lots everywhere. So very soon you will be called to the polls again and some of you will be drawn by lot.

Today, I know that many voters, distraught by the crisis, in search of guidance, have cast a protest vote, without really adhering to the unrealistic program of misarchy. Very quickly, perhaps as early as tomorrow, they will see the extent of their mistake. They will be able to come to their senses. Everyone can see the terrible consequences of our defeat today. It prepares our victory tomorrow. I ask you to remain mobilized, in our regions, our towns and our villages. The election campaign to overthrow the misarchy is open. And I promise you today, I swear that within a few months at the most, the misarchist parenthesis will be closed and it will be closed definitively ! Long live the Republic ! Long live Alterbrié !”

In the courtyard of the academy, this speech was highly commented on. At my table, Gavríil assured me that he was dreaming, this capitalos, and that the victory of the misarchy was irreversible.

“Who drank the water of freedom will never again quench his thirst with another water,” Aminata sententiously announced. Felix approved :

“It will be very difficult for capitalos to turn back, once the dominant properties have been abolished and the users of property have become owners.”

Affoué nodded her head and pulled a big wooden pipe out of her pocket. She began to stuff it thoughtfully from tobacco :

“Capitalos will do everything to destabilize the Alterbrié... The people can be afraid and, as all the power will be given to the people...”

She was interrupted by a group of students, standing on a table. They made grand gestures to ask for silence. They said they wanted to talk. They demanded that even the television be turned off. Affoué made a sign of approval to the projectionists and silence was made.

On the table, a young woman was pushing her classmates aside a little. She was wearing a short skirt, T-shirt and sneakers. She shook her tangled brown hair and took a breath. It was with a vibrant voice of militant vigor that she began :

“Spectators ! This is what I see on this place : spectators ! While our sisters and brothers of Alterbrié are facing all the forces of reaction, while the revolution has a few weeks to succeed, while the capitalos powers are organizing their retaliation, we are immobile ! I see some dancing, others are stuffing themselves ! Are we going to stay here ? Are we going to stop there or are we going to put all our forces in the balance to help our sisters and brothers ? – some voices were raising : “Yes” ; “She is right” ; “We must do something.” – For our part,” she continued, “together with the friends around me, we have decided to leave tonight for Alterbrié ! We need to set up groups all over the Arcanian region and gather resources. All together to support our companions in struggle. Long live the revolution !”

A few yards away, another woman climbed up on a table. She was wearing a leather jacket that was too big for her and a fireman’s helmet that was hiding half of her face. Only when she took off the helmet I recognized her : this was Clithène, my Clithène ! But when did she come back here ? How come she didn’t join me back ? Her attire was out of place, but she stood with the rectitude, the assurance and the strength of the great abbess, who always slept in her. She took the floor :

“You are right ! If we can help the revolutionary Alterbrié, then we must help the revolutionary Alterbrié! We, firemen of the district of Ehrmile – she hit on the insignia of her leather jacket -, we will send a whole brigade of help and rescue to our revolutionary comrades !” She was cheered by the entire fire brigade, which, I only now realized, surrounded the table on which she had just perched. They approved her loudly : “For sure we’re going there !” ; “We are with you !” ; “Long live the Alterbrié !” Clithène concluded shouting : “We are the firemen of Ehrmile ! Solidarity and revolutionary! Let’s go to Alterbrié !” She jumped off the table to land in the vigorous arms of a colossal red-haired firefighter, his crimson face half eaten by his thick sideburns. She raised her fist, shouted again : “Long live the revolution !” and kissed her fireman on the lips.

The excitement carried the whole assembly away. Affoué herself applauded, the pipe stuck between her teeth. I thought I was the only one who was petrified. I tried to follow Clithène with my eyes. And then, finally, I tried not to look at her. Felix put his arm on my shoulder. He handed me a large beer bock. I was drinking all I could drink all at once. A lot of it spilled over my chest. I was soaking wet. At this point, I held Felix tightly against me, sharing half of the beer that drowned my shirt on him.

A powerful shot of adrenaline detached me from him. I realized the urgency of the situation. Clithène... As I was knowing her, she could leave immediately. Without even saying goodbye or anything. I looked for her. She had already left the square with her brigade. She couldn’t be far away.

I got up and managed to get out of the square, half crushing all those who were sitting here and there, despite their protests. I walked with great nervous strides, randomly, in any direction. The village of the academy was not very big. I couldn’t find any trace of Clithène. I rushed to

the sheep meadow. A compact crowd was screaming and dancing, agglutinated around a raging Bergþór. If she was there, I couldn't find her. Anyway, if she was there, it wouldn't have been for leaving. And if she was leaving... I was an idiot. She must have been in the parking lot.

In desperation, I was running out to burst my lungs. I saw a red truck maneuvering in the dust among the cars and getting ready to leave. It was a truck from the firemen ! I accelerated while waving my arms in its direction. They saw me and they stopped.

Clisthène got out of the truck, alone, and walked towards me. I stopped. Every step she took was taking her away from this damn truck and bringing her closer to me. I slowed down, I was feeling like walking backwards. Clisthène face was closed, determined... Her determination immediately radiated to me. I had to go for it, it was my only chance. As soon as she was near me, before she could say a word, in the strongest tone I could, I exclaimed :

“I go to Alterbriúe with you! To join the revolution!”

She was slowly shaking her head :

“This isn't a good idea, Séb. You've seen it. I'm going with the volunteer fire department. And... and I'd rather go without you.”

The information stopped at the border of my brain, and it couldn't get into it properly. I stood still, silent, frowning. Before I asked her to explain herself, to explain to me, she added :

“I move on, Sébastien. We're done.”

She had taken on that bossy figure, the one that was scaring me.

“I... I don't need you,” I tried desperate. “I'll go to Alterbriúe. And I can go there by my own means!”

“No, Séb,” she answered me quietly. “There's a revolution over there. And, all alone, you're going to be lost again. It's not for you. You'll be much better off here. And we need someone to take care of our farm.”

“Our farm... ? I... I get it. If you want, I'll wait for you.”

“No way! First of all, I don't know if I'm coming back. And second of all, even if I do come back, it probably won't be for you. I'm not going to keep dragging you around, you know. We need to stop, once and for all. You knew well, anyway, that it couldn't last between us?”

“No ! Well, maybe... I don't know... We could also think about it a little bit, right...?”

“About what ? Now I'm leaving, you understand, right now, I'm expected. And I want to leave completely free. So we cut, right away, cleanly, without tearing. Agreed?”

I was strongly disagreeing. Without tearing ? But my guts, my ribs, my skull, were all ripped apart. Her glacial gaze was piercing me. I opened my mouth to retaliate, but her eyes were flaring, mercilessly. I nodded a vague sign of acquiescence. I was too afraid of her reaction if I kept talking.

“The peace of the lamb be upon you,” she whispered to me.

The sentence set me back weeks. I saw the great abbess again, ready to punish her faithful. She seemed to relax, smiled at me and, without warning, slapped me hard. Before I had time to react, she winked at me, tenderly kissed my bruised cheek and concluded : “We had loads of fun, both of us, no?” I nodded in silence. I felt like crying. She ran away without leaving me time to do it. I watched her get into the red fire truck, to the applause of the fire brigade who had come down to better appreciate our show. Everyone got back on board. They started at once and disappeared in the dust of the road.

A month had passed. I read again Clithène's last message, the one in which she asked me to stop texting her for *good*. That had been a week ago. Since then, I'd been abstaining. But a week was a long time. Versatile as she was, she could have changed opinions? I was not sure. I didn't want to sound heavy. I sent her a discreet 'How is it going?'. It was light, just a sign. She couldn't be bothered. I was waiting. No answer. The next day, either.

Ever since she left, I'd been trying to act like nothing happened. Felix was introducing me to the relaxing properties of certain mushrooms. I kept going back and forth between the farm and the academy as a machine. I'd even found myself turning down a few friendly sexual proposals from Danái. Without envy, without energy, I'd stopped working overtime. With my weekly lecture, I was doing my half time at the academy and I was content to work two afternoons a week on the farm. That was enough. In any case, the farm had hired five other partners, as a cost-saving measure – to avoid the multiplication of overtime, which was always costly. So our work patterns had become normal. Even Felix was now content to work three days a week, two for full-time work and one to pay off his CoDeW in overtime faster. He had resumed his entomology studies and explained to me that he wanted to prepare a doctorate.

In my free time I had tried to learn electric guitar, 'find back my pep', on the advice of Bergþór. But my heart wasn't in it. I had preferred to get into the habit of going for a stroll, alone, by the sea. The coast near the farm was steep. Small tortuous paths were winding their way from cove to cove. The vegetation was short, prickly, eroded by the wind and salt, and suited my mood of sorrow. I had discovered a small fishing village with white houses and slate roofs. Its inhabitants were totally ignorant of misarchist law and they didn't care much about it. They didn't do politics. At first, I had thought it was a tourist village because there were so many painting workshops. In reality, the paintings on display were not for sale. It just seemed that these people had gathered here around their common taste for painting. Two days a week, they took turns on the three trawlers in the village to go fishing in the open sea – an activity that provided all the inhabitants with enough income to live comfortably.

As I was hanging out in the only coffee of the village, I was quite surprised to discover that they were organizing a gastronomic tournament there. On the ninth day of each decade, a meal was prepared by the competitors for the whole village. It consisted of a starter, a main course and a dessert. The quality of these dishes and wines accompanied a warm atmosphere, where conversations about cooking, painting and the vagaries of fishing dominated. Although outside the district, I had obtained a regular guest spot by preparing pike quenelles for them.

This warm place was a precious diversion for me. On non-competition days, simple but neat meals were served here. And, often I lingered there, with the excuse of a book or a newspaper to read.

Two months since Clithène had left. I couldn't do this. My efforts to reestablish a routine weren't numbing my pain. Worse, they were making it worse. Clithène had taken an interest in me, but that had been because I had been someone else. I had been a traveler, lost, quirky, supposedly fearless. I had been the rumor and the perfume of what came from far away. To acclimatize myself had been destroying myself. The regular scheduling of my new life had engulfed me, while she had kept spinning further and further away. She had been the favorite of a sect of sadomasochistic fanatics. She had gone into the revolutionary storm. She is one of those who

only breathes in high winds. And I'm anything but a squall. Her presence against my skin was an accidental happiness, stolen in the shadow of a misunderstanding.

I was thinking of going to Alterbrië for a while. Even without trying to find her, I might feel less lonely in the country where she was living. But Felix persuaded me that this was just an excuse to chase her again.

Gradually, the peaceful images of a time when I hadn't known anything about her came back to me. I came to imagine that it might be distracting to take the Parisian metro again or to hang out at the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont. This way of escape soon appeared to me to be the only possible one.

Arcania was only fifteen hours by plane from France.

Epilogue

When I had come back, I wanted everyone to know. For the first few weeks, I even tried to tell everything on a stool in the street. I shuddered at the thought that the police would arrest me and force me to keep quiet. But their indifference was complete. To the few onlookers who came to listen to me, my story was either too extraordinary to be realistic or too realistic to make people dream. The only two people who agreed unreservedly with me turned out to be Jehovah's Witnesses, who invited me to fear the coming of Armageddon and begged me to join Christ's kingdom.

Since then, time has passed. My ambitions have diminished. Out of a need for comfort, I gradually reintegrated certain huts that were mine, before my departure for Arcania. I resumed my teaching of law. My family ties faded away by themselves. Pictures of Clisthène, placed here and there in my apartment, did not discourage a few adventurers passing through and my solitude, distracted, became less painful.

With a few friends, we rented an apartment to use as a common office, on the thirteenth floor of a tower in the Chapelle neighborhood, in the 18th district of Paris. At that time, everyone left. The view from the window overlooks the ring road. I watch the dull light from the commuter cars slip by.

The bosses didn't even hide their contemptuous greed anymore. Xenophobia has become a common, almost universal political discourse. The Muslim populations, targeted, cultivate identity withdrawal and retrograde religiosity. Beyond the Mediterranean, religious wars are raging, rivaling each other in cruelty. The West is bombing all this, a bit randomly. Further on, despotic China intensifies its inequalities and feeds its anti-Western resentments to increase its military budget. The atom proliferates discreetly in the shadow of antiquated power plants. Frightened peoples are securing themselves by thinking of border controls and Big Data. They dream of themselves under the protection of a powerful leader, surrounded by drones and military robots.

After slavery, after the racist colonization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, after the genocides of the twentieth century, human beings could not forget everything so quickly, nor fall so low. None of this is possible. This 21st century was created from scratch to scare children. It is not *realistic*, not even credible. And I'm not fooled.

I will quietly reread my testimony on Arcania. Tomorrow I will send it to some friends. Perhaps I will go and distribute a few copies in the cool breeze of the memory of the Standing Nights. Come what may. I have done what I could. If people want to deny reality and live in their nightmares, what can I do? Me ? I know very well that it is not with a manuscript, thrown overboard like a bottle, that I am going to change much, or even impress Clisthène. At the very least, if I were arrested, beaten up, even tortured, trying to propagate misarchist ideas, I could perhaps attract her attention. But no repression is on the horizon and I'm not very persistent. Everyone has his limits and mine are reached. I just hope that, if my abbess returns to Nehushtân one day, my story will amuse her enough to make her agree, with a small glass of smoky wine in her hand, to tell me about her adventures in the Alterbríe revolution.

Because as of tomorrow, cowardly, I'm going back to Arcania to protect myself. There, at least, I'll be able to walk around in djellaba without attracting attention, hang out all day in a freexpo and find this little hotel with its thick soup and childish receptionist. If I find him again, I know he will accompany me running on the beach of Nehushtân and dive into reality, straight into the waves.

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Emmanuel Dockès
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An essay to rebuild everything
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