

UNKNOWN

Early in the morning, a man was walking along the sidewalks, gazing at the gray sky.

“Who am I in the midst of all this immensity?” he thought absentmindedly. “I am...”

Suddenly, doubt seized him, as he found himself unable to answer.

Simple as the question was, he could not answer it. A shiver of anxiety ran down his spine. What was happening? Why couldn't he remember something so simple? Why couldn't he remember his own name? He stood there for a few seconds, dazed. A hot flash, maybe? He looked up at the barely risen sun... Fatigue, perhaps?

“Where am I?” He was relieved to at least be able to answer that question, recognizing the narrow, ochre-colored streets of old Lyon. He was not completely lost, and so he decided to look for a quiet place, a café, to sit down and gather his thoughts. He took a side street that gave him a strange feeling of familiarity, one that oddly soothed him. What had happened to bring him to this point? He had no idea, and chose instead to focus on walking, hoping to chase away the growing unease inside him.

As he began approaching the shopping alleys and the cold morning wind whipped his face, a distant clamor caught his attention. He turned his head and noticed a crowd gathered at the far end of the street he was crossing. Passersby of all kinds had assembled, making a great deal of noise, though it was impossible to tell why. Intrigued, he took a few steps toward them and noticed that the people were moving together in the same direction, some holding up cardboard signs whose slogans he could not read from that distance. Why were they marching like that? He shrugged and moved closer, eager to find out more.

He soon discovered it was much more than a small group. The demonstrators numbered in the hundreds, forcing their way with difficulty between the narrow walls, almost pushing one another, like a tidal wave trapped between two cliffs of concrete. The chants... was it his hearing? He could not make out the words; too many voices were shouting at once. His curiosity pushed him further, and he followed the protesters along the side, wondering if he could approach one of them to find out what drove them. He hurried along, almost running to keep up with the frantic pace of the march. What was happening that made them move so fast?

He finally slowed down a few meters ahead, out of breath. What was the point of chasing them, after all? He was about to turn around and give up on discovering what stirred all these people when suddenly he saw a young woman, standing in the middle of the protest, who had stopped and was smiling at him from afar.

They exchanged a glance for a brief second. He was almost afraid she might get trampled, standing there in the middle of the flowing crowd, yet she remained, waiting for him. He

hesitated for what felt like an eternity before the monstrous tide, vaguely reminded of the image of the siren tempting Ulysses to leap into the sea. Then he rushed forward.

He reached the stranger within the crowd. In her twenties, a student, she greeted him with words he could not hear beneath the chants that surrounded them. He barely managed to shout, "What's going on?" before she motioned that she couldn't hear him either. He tried once or twice more, in vain, and then they both started walking, following the others.

Things began to speed up, the chants growing more frantic, more aggressive. The march itself became more erratic, stopping abruptly at times only to resume immediately after. He had no idea what was happening, but he felt increasingly exhilarated by a newfound fervor, now marching eagerly along. The pace of the procession was no longer a problem; he felt swept up by the immense momentum, by the energetic rhythm, finding himself joining the chants without even understanding them.

He passed all kinds of people along the way: retirees, students, workers... and a few odd figures, like a man wearing an Anonymous mask, topped with a red cap and proudly sporting a yellow vest. He caught himself overtaking others beside his new companion, taking the lead. "I don't know who I am or who they are, but what energy!" he thought joyfully.

They reached a vast square, and like a wave bursting from nowhere, the crowd flooded it, taking possession of the space. He shouted, he roared, with an ardor he had never thought himself capable of. But then again... what did he really know about himself? His doubt had vanished. No matter who he was, there was only *it*, the crowd.

Every movement, every gesture synchronized with the others filled him with ecstasy. He had lost sight of his new companion, but it didn't matter; he was glowing from within, burning with a joy that lifted him. He raised his arms, shaking among the others, electrified by the unison of the demonstration.

Suddenly, the crowd stopped, and the cheers turned into roars. A hundred policemen, masked, stood behind their shields, batons in hand, blocking the way forward. The drop in adrenaline froze him in place. How dared they stop them? They had done nothing wrong. Then, driven by a sudden impulse, he surged forward with the others, at the front of the crowd, ready to fight.

Gunshots rang out, the acrid smoke of tear gas rising and burning his throat, but he kept advancing without flinching. They were only a few dozen meters from the officers when one of them raised the barrel of his weapon toward him. He stopped and locked eyes with the officer. For one long second, the two stared at each other, their gazes crossing. He had no time to say a word before a blast erupted from the officer's hand.

He only had time to feel something strike his forehead violently, a shock that spread through his entire skull in an instant, hurling him backward onto the pavement.

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“And did you know the man?”

“No, no... I just saw him outside the protest, he looked a bit lost... and he reminded me of my grandfather... We walked together for a while... I think he was there like all of us, to protest against the cuts to aid for young people and retirees... There were so many people there, especially for those suffering from Alzheimer’s, who are no longer being cared for... My God, it’s horrible.”