

Translated with the help and corrections of

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Chapter 5 – La Place de la Madeleine

(Madeleine Square)

Carry me to the end of the Earth!

Carry me to the wonders of other lands

These lyrics by Charles Aznavour, once in his mind, he always had difficulty to get rid of them. They followed him in a recurring way.

*It seems to me that misery would be
less painful in the sun*

Me, who knew only the northern sky all of my life, ...,

The North, for him, was the Lorraine region. And it had forsaken him, Lorraine with contempt and cruelty. Bernard was a steel worker in Gandrange when the site was sold for a symbolic franc to Lakshmi Mittal. Then, despite promises made by the President of the Republic himself, the closure of the electric steel mill and the billet train became definitive. All this was absurd. Official statements with empty words made no sense. Nothing was tangible anymore. Employment became an illusion.

*I would like to wash away the grey
in setting sail*

At 52 years old, the infernal spiral of despair took him in an abysmal fall. No more job, no more love, no more accommodation, money depleted, serious depression. Too many failures,—so Bernard came to Béziers, in the middle of summer.

And the TGV to Béziers would become—a ticket to a little bit of heaven and a big piece of hell.

First torment, horror loomed. He had been stuck for several hours because of a suicide on the railway. What had moved him was the other traveller's reactions: they were thinking about their delays and their troubles because of this same delay. They were all blind to the reality that someone had just killed himself.

In Béziers, his torture awaited him in this order:
Sun, Feria, Alcohol, Accident.

*a glass in hand
I lose reality
and suddenly my thoughts-lift me
and set me in a wonderful summer...*

At the end of the day, arriving at the railway station, under heavy heat, Bernard marvelled at the

Poet's Park¹ by taking a detour to its open-air theatre². At the bend of a winding alley, he was surprised to see a strange old woman lying on the lawn among the floral arrangements. Her lips were moving tenuously as if she was singing a last poem, a last prayer. He thought he heard: "Claude, Claude! Onlookers crowded around her. Bernard approached her but was quickly pushed aside by the emergency medical assistance and the park guards who were running. Farther on, he arrived at the Paul Riquet alleys, the first gateway to the féria with its bodegas, casetas and Sevillian village. There, he drank his first glass. Alcohol was his salvation for-humankind. Once he had calmed down, the suffering was less severe. He felt closer to others. Through the alleys, the public jubilation linked him to a wider world, to other lives than his own, to fraternities, to the Midi history. It was there, in 1907, where soldiers from the 17th infantry had mutinied: "There are still soldiers who are not working-class murderers," he recalled. This thought suddenly took him back to Gandrange, to his comrades whom he strangely tried to recognise in the crowd that was building up.

Then, the alcohol, the dizzy crowd, the sounds of the peñas and bandas carried him in a whirlwind beyond the alleys. Noises, smells, deafening music, laughter and cries that answered each other, dazzling evening lights, growing heat, more or less controlled

¹ Plateau des poètes

² Théâtre de verdure

movements, everything became blurred. In spite of this, he loved this unaccustomed euphoria and dreamed of a new life that could begin at last. Another possible world with other values, that of a peaceful, harmonious and responsible humanity.

*Where I see love reaching out arms like a fool,
Run to come meet me,
and I throw myself into my dream
When the bars close*

But fate did not let him breathe freedom so easily, for it seized him by surprise, late in the boiling night, not far from Madeleine Square, when after having drunk too much wine, he was hit by a vehicle, whilst crossing the road carelessly on Mill's ramp. In the hospital's emergency room, it was a crazy summer crowd. Patients lying on stretchers cluttered the corridors. It was difficult to squeeze through the groans and disturbing silence. Bernard's skull scan revealed a trauma and a large hematoma. It took several days to get a more precise diagnosis: a blood clot had reabsorbed, frontal lobes had not been affected, but his clavicle was broken and both legs were shattered. And more seriously, cognitive problems were appearing. The ENT specialist tested him by repeating words. Bernard repeated words that had nothing to do with the words being spoken. Was it humour? To the nurses and care assistants, he simply said: "My name is Bernard", "Hello", "Good evening." You couldn't get any other information from

him. As soon as one tried to enter into a dialogue with him, he began to blather on interminably in an inaccessible logorrhoea at full speed and in a totally incomprehensible artificial language. Cognitive resonance seemed to have stopped definitely for him. After a few months, he was placed in a wheelchair in a public nursing home not far from the hospital.

However, researchers followed his pathology to try to unravel this mystery. A specialist in neurology and another in lexical analysis tried to decipher his word salad and get Bernard to express himself in an understandable way. Over time, it was decided to digitise and lemmatise his speech. This would allow the construction of graphs, and these were to propose lines of research into the state of his mind and his concerns. But nothing was done. On the whole, the research pointed to what one could easily have guessed: the world of the steel industry and work world were the main setting for his thoughts. The vocabulary did not change. Other themes such as family, love, leisure, sport and society were absent. One always had to be content with "My name is Bernard", "Hello", "Good evening."

At the nursing home, Dr Georges Antoine Viallard came across him while visiting his mother. Surprised to see a patron younger than the other residents, the doctor asked the nursing staff about it. The case was briefly explained to him. Since his arrival, doctors, nurses, care assistants, and other residents, in short, all had tried to talk to Bernard. It was a complete failure. Curious, Viallard approached him gently, bent

down to be at his level and gave him his best smile, declaiming: "My name is Georges Antoine", "Hello", "Good evening". In response, he received a mess of words that lasted more than an hour, in an irritated tone. After a few minutes, the doctor triggered the automatic recording on his phone as a professional reflex and remained patiently listening until the end. The doctor's nods and smiles marked out this first interview. Viallard tried to feel Bernard until he almost became himself. Eye-to-eye, he dived towards his opposite eyes and tried to find a place for himself inside the other person with an attention stretched like a ray of light. Without heart, there is no empathy, he thought again. He dared to take his hand gently. Bernard remained indolent, apathetic.

Afterwards, Viallard made a habit of coming back to listen to him, sitting on the same bench, as if in a ritual. Bernard was waiting for him to pour out a similar volley of words in a calmer tone. A respect, if not more was created. One day, Doctor Viallard took the initiative of answering him with a mess of similar words carefully elaborated to which he added sparingly words about childhood: such as little, kid, tenderness, school, baby, toddler, pee, duty, child, cuddle, toy, teen, poo, cute, doll, gifts, bedroom, etc. All this was pronounced with a soft and serene prosody. Bernard was very surprised and attentive and enunciated another volley of words in a questioning tone. Then Viallard replied with the same sequence in an even more soothing tone with a smooth, low, warm voice. The same scenario was

repeated thereafter without Bernard remembering the words introduced by the doctor about childhood. The attempt to refocus on memory or a wider world had failed.

Dr Viillard's work was expanding. It was clear for Bernard; words no longer had any meaning, either literally or figuratively, they were no more than a device or rather a fire of extinguished words. They no longer illuminated anything because Bernard held back his light. An inverted sun where the rays were directed inwards, inaccessible. So, we had to try something else. Why not the sensations and the emotions linked to them? Since he knew how to show irritation and questioning. Taking Bernard by senses to emotions would find a direction and a thread of communication. So, his second experiment consisted in awakening him through images. He presented him with a slide show on his tablet which showed all emotions and their variations based on photos: joy, fear, sadness, surprise, anger, disgust or fatigue. The only one that made him react was the one of an angry metal worker. For all the others, he remained impassive and stoic. The interview was concluded with a new flurry of incoherent words.

If listening and perception did not function normally, something else had to be tried. So Viillard tried his last experiment: sensory awakening. This time he arrived with an arsenal of torture objects: ice cubes, wasabi, chocolate, a clothes peg, a vuvuzela, a candle, incense, a scraper, silk, velvet, a toothpick, an ultra-powerful lamp, a horn, a plastic film charged

with static electricity, and so on. Again, there was a very few reactions, no attempt at verbal representation, except for a good hour's worth of words to punctuate the interview, to which Viallard responded with an absurd speech of the same length. These exchanges, so to speak, were transformed into a kind of verbal joust, where the words no longer had any meaning, only the intonation showed a kind of confrontation. On the part of one, questioning followed irritation and on the part of the other, appeasement was the order of the day. Complicity had formed in an original arrangement.

Doctor Viallard decided to space out his visits to Bernard. Nevertheless, he phoned to ask about his condition. The nurse told him that he was becoming more and more agitated. Other residents turned their backs on him. No one wanted to hear his tirades of absurd words.

When Viallard returned to see him after several weeks of absence, Bernard's face lit up. Then the game started again, but when Viallard finished, he was surprised to hear Bernard reply: "Speak clearly Georges Antoine!" "Certainly, with pleasure," he replied. And then he continued: "It's been so long since anyone has spoken to me! The light had just come on. And he continued with a short word salad to which Viallard added two or three incomprehensible phrases. They looked at each other with the same smile, lighting each other up.

In the following months, Bernard made great progress and moved from the nursing home to the city

centre. From time to time he met Viillard. Both of them would hilariously call each other out with a few sentences of nonsense in public.

*I would fly away,
leaving my past without any remorse,
Without any baggage and my heart-free, singing ...
just belting out!
Carry me to the end of the Earth,
Carry me to countries of wonders
It seems to me that misery would be
less painful in the sun!*

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