

G A B R I E L A L E X A N D E R

A hand is shown reaching upwards from the bottom left, with fingers slightly curled. Several birds are depicted in flight around the hand: one is perched on the index finger, another is flying just below the wrist, and two others are in the upper right area. The background is a textured, golden-yellow surface with a fine, grainy texture, suggesting a sunset or a warm, abstract environment.

SECOND CHANCE

WE ALL HAVE TWO LIVES AND
THE SECOND ONE STARTS WHEN WE
REALIZE THAT WE ONLY HAVE ONE

CHAPTER ONE

WHATEVER DOESN'T KILL ME MAKES ME STRONGER

The piercing ring of the telephone rattles around my head, but I can't manage to pull myself out of a deep, dark sleep. It seems impossible to find my way out of this overwhelming stupor, which leaves me paralyzed. I feel like I'm being constantly pulled back down and wrapped up by Morpheus's stifling arms. My survival instincts are sending out powerful distress signals... Every cell in my body is warning me that I have to react immediately. I've got to answer this telephone whose ringing shot that first jolting shock through my brain circuits. After a long, intense effort, I manage to reach out with my hand and grab the damn phone before raising it slowly to my ear.

This takes so much energy that I'm utterly exhausted. I feel four times heavier than usual and lodged in my mattress. What could have happened to put me in this state? I feel like I'm at the gates of Hell! My head hurts so much I can feel my pulse pounding inside it as if someone is beating on my skull with a hammer!

I suddenly recognize my brother-in-law's voice. He keeps repeating «Hello Gabriel?» I try to answer him, but I've lost my voice. The only sound that comes out of my mouth is my raspy breathing as if I have suddenly gone mute.

In a panic, I slam down the receiver. I've got to get out of the bed. If I don't, I'll surely die here like a dog, overcome by this stone dead sleep! I don't know how many pills or how much booze I guzzled the night before to wind up in this miserable state. I don't give a damn... I stopped checking or controlling my booze and barbiturate consumption ages ago. I need them too much for my survival, to help me in each and every moment of the nightmarish existence my life has become.

I'm sweating, dripping buckets... and now I'm drenched. If I don't try to get up right now, I may never get up again. All my limbs seem anesthetized; I can't move a single one of my leaden fingers. I try to roll over so I can fall out of bed. I have one single objective in mind... not to fall back to sleep.

The best strategy would be to head for the bathroom. I'm convinced that it is my last chance for salvation. I finally manage to roll out of bed and collapse on the floor with the muted sound of a sack of potatoes landing on a thick carpet. I try desperately to reach that damned bathroom, which seems so far away and unwilling to aid in my sur-

vival. I inch forward on my hands and knees, like a soldier slithering under barbed wire to escape from the enemy. But I am the enemy; the enemy is my drunkenness, my despair. Terrible but true... I have become my own worst enemy! How can I protect myself from myself? Is it even possible?

“Why does everything always seem to be against me, as if I were cursed? Why don’t other people look after me a bit more? After all, don’t they know who I am? It’s ME. The superior ME. The one who thinks that he alone suffers existential problems. Yes, ME, the fallen enfant king, lost in his own fantastic parallel universe. Me, that eternal egotist, the immature adolescent who has a never-ending need for the love and attention from those around him.

The desires and needs of others were, of course, less important (from my egocentric point of view, to be sure).

My mind, full of my most intimate thoughts, seems to want to pull me into a dark pit, to drag me into the abyss that houses hopeless rejects, all those who never learned to blend in with the crowd, who couldn’t fit into the mold that society imposed on them. It’s a mold that’s too limited, too much of caricature, too tight for some, certainly for me, and for everyone who, like me, knows neither true communication, nor laughter, nor sleep, nor the simple act of living... not without a tiny pill or a little drink. «The drink doesn’t

matter as long as you are drunk!» This corny cliché from the poet Alfred de Musset has a lot of meaning for those of us who have the misfortune of being soul-sick alcoholics, people for whom emotion means frustration.

Constantly living in this condition was sheer misery for me! It felt as if nothing, nor anyone could free me. Condemned to death... or condemned to live like this until my last hour, which is even more terrifying!

After five interminable minutes, I finally manage to lean on the bidet and hoist myself up over the sink. I turn on the faucet and let the water run over my hand, but I hardly feel any sensation. My body is so numb that I can't truly tell the difference between hot and cold.

I decide to put my head under the tap. To do that, I have to make one last, enormous effort to pull myself up. I draw up my last reserves of energy found in my desperation... finally the water starts to trickle down my forehead and streams down my face.

I have the horrifying sensation that my face is no longer made of the same substance, that it has become hard, insensitive, as if it's covered with a coat of resin, like some strange mask stuck to my skin. I can't feel anything; I can hardly tell the difference between hot and cold. Maybe I'm dying...

just like that, stupidly, in this quaint little bathroom... I who always dreamed of a fabulous destiny, is going to come to end in this drab apartment in a dilapidated house project!

I don't really know why I put up such a fight for survival. I've wanted to commit suicide for years. I should almost be content with the way things are going.

But not that day, no way! Dying then was not what I wanted, at least not at that point in time, not in that place, not like that. Someone who wishes to commit suicide only accepts such a death on his own terms, when he chooses the time and place; otherwise the instinct for survival always wins out.

Fortunately (or, unfortunately, whichever), I gradually begin to feel the coolness of water on my skin, eyelids, and lips. I opened my mouth to let in some of that blessed water, which by now was pouring all over the place. Little by little, I came back to life (Hallelujah).

That was then. I know, or rather I feel, that I can make it now. Life, the gods, the universe, has given me another chance. Why? Maybe they didn't really feel like it? Maybe I'm not quite ripe for the kiss of death, for the crossover to the great beyond. At least that's what the old gentleman seems to be saying, the one with a long white beard perched up there on

a soft white cloud, whose sense of humor seems very odd, or even, over the ages, rather belligerent and bloodthirsty.

A few minutes after my cool bath, I gradually start to see through my heavy drowsiness. I decide to go sit on the couch in the living room, across from the family TV set with its screen that lights up the hosts of morbid, grotesque evenings and conditions us tirelessly to have small desires for assembly line consumer products, both useless and superfluous. I struggle back to my laughable throne, that royal seat for a good-for-nothing, an unemployed, insignificant sleepwalker.

I drag myself along as best I can, and finally manage to collapse on the cheap, brown leather sofa, designed in admirable imitation of some fake English style. Everything in this apartment is in poor taste: gaudy, eccentric colors, cheap, kitschy gondolas in green and blue; a pink doll bought at some junk market in Italy; gold-plated candlesticks; a baroque chandelier in imitation crystal; a phony Louis XIV living room set at odds with a super modern television. Nothing goes together. It's an apartment in the purest "working class style," in the meanest sense of the term. The walls are as thin as rolling papers, which give you the dubious advantage of allowing you to hear the neighbors as they flush the toilet, make love, and—most ironically—whisper their little secrets to each other! This cheap cardboard decor is

my parents' apartment, where I was raised and spent my very painful teenage years, where my existential anxieties were the most intense. Five sisters, three brothers and my parents: more than ten people trying to find a way to live under the same roof.

For someone like me who had always wanted to be an only child and have everybody look after me and pay attention to what happened to me, I could hardly dream of anything better! But instead what I got was just a disregarded spot in family where everyone had their own problems. Of course, I was self-centered and egotistical like everyone who is neurotic and unhappy.

Sprawled out on the center sofa in that meaningless living room, my mind gradually begins to clear, which doesn't mean things are improving. An alcoholic is extremely poor company for himself, especially when his mind is clear. In fact, the problem is that an alcoholic only feels good when he's drunk enough not to see reality, not to be weighed down by the imagined pressures in his dismal daily life. So if there's one thing he really does not want, it's a clear head!

In this particular case, I must admit that, for once, I was not sorry to be coming back to reality. It meant I wasn't going to die, or at least not right away.

But what happened yesterday, or maybe the day before, to put me in this condition?

I'd slept nearly 48 hours straight... Okay, I'm beginning to remember! It's slowly coming back to me. Of course... I'd decided to kill myself! Ah yes, one more time! I was sick of pretending to be happy, pretending to be normal. So, after making it through a rough patch where I felt less and less human and more and more like a zombie, I decided to put an end to my mental agony. To reach that goal quickly and simply, there was only one solution: put an end to the countdown that separated me from that crucial fatal moment, the one where the candles are snuffed out, making way for the final, endless sleep.

When you're living in a logical vacuum, what makes more sense than finding an illogical solution to irrational problems?

During that memorable night where each second flashed through my mind, I had searched the house in vain for my survival pills, those little white pills that I suddenly needed so much. Not one left, zilch, my box was miserably empty... Zero, a figure that, in no time flat, wreaks havoc with your evening and makes sleep impossible! It was Sunday, and my stock of Temesta, my sweet, legal drug (sold by my two favorite pushers, my doctor and my pharmacist) was entirely

depleted.

That night, as I lay in bed in the throes of withdrawal, everything was blown out of proportion. No way to sleep; panicked, distressed, I sweated buckets. I tossed and turned constantly in my hot, soaked sheets and stared hopelessly at the ceiling in an effort to calm my anxieties.

After a few hours of that ordeal, which would destroy the morale of the happiest guy on the block (which was far from the case), where I found no way out of my anxiety, totally unable to haul myself out of the titanic depression that engulfed me, I drafted a radical plan to get rid of this cruel mistress that I called: my suffering. I decided once and for all to do away with my faithful, exclusive companion, that unbearable daily pain, which had blown up to gigantic proportions that night!

It seemed to me that best way to get rid of the enemy within was to destroy its habitat.

The plan was simple and clear: a nice, tidy suicide with a goodbye letter, as touching as possible, intelligent too, to make sure that everyone finally realized how sensitive and refined I was. (After all, if I'm going to die, let's have everybody admire the act.)

All I had to do the next morning was make the rounds to the local doctors and tell them that my family doctor was on vacation and that I was about to go to the USA for three months, so I needed my usual dose of tranquilizers, and blah blah blah...

Early that morning, I got up from my prison-bed, which I lived in like a strait-jacket, despite that no one had forced me to sleep there... but by some subtle evil, I felt drawn to the mattress as if by a magnet. That night, it had become my sad fate.

I remember clearly that I pulled my jeans on noiselessly to keep from waking my little brother, Michel, a brother I didn't get along with then and still don't today, now 20 years down the line. Over time, I've understood that there are people who aren't necessarily bad, they may even be good souls, but you'll just never get along with them.

Once I was appropriately dressed to meet death, I headed out to the street with a lump in my throat. (After all I had decided to kill myself). With a touch of nostalgia, I kept telling myself sadly, "Hey, this is the last time I'll see that neighbor, the last time I'll go past that café, see the concierge, and all those eccentric neighbors who had populated my child-

hood!”

I was sure of one thing: they wouldn't miss me. Nobody misses a distraught man because he makes everyone uncomfortable. You don't know what to do around someone like that. If you're really happy, you feel bad about showing it in front of him; if you feel blue, you don't want to show that either for fear of mocking his genuine distress. You've got to say, depressed people are a pain, particularly those with chronic depression who are constantly haunted by their own shadows.

That was exactly it: I had become a nuisance. I, who was full of such hopes and dreams for young Gabriel, often said, «When I grow up, I'll be a singer, a film director, a sea captain, I'll be, I'll be...» All kids dream like that, don't they? But no, this was the end for me: no more dreams, no more plans, and no more grand voyages. This was to be the end of everything. I was going to put a definitive stop to any idea of the future.

I spent a fair part of the night imagining my funeral. I can assure you that in the scenario had I dreamed up for myself, everybody was crying: my parents, my brothers and sisters, my friends. They were all deeply unhappy about not un-

derstanding earlier that I needed a helping hand, some charitable, generous and sympathetic support.

Once I had run through a few rehearsals of my heart-rending funeral, I was ready that morning for the act that would seal my fate and forever unite me with all the accursed artists, those who were so misunderstood, so oversensitive, clairvoyant, realistic, the ones I listed as: Verlaine, Rimbaud, Proust and me! «But, I was proudest of all, and I was still pretending to be myself,» as my adoptive godfather Jacques Brel* once sang (The adoption was one-sided because unfortunately he'd never heard of me).

I located all the local doctors. None of them opened before 1:30, so I was forced to wait a little while before I could end my pitiful existence.

I spent my time loitering in a very noisy, smoky café. In that meaningless clamor, all the local proletarians and bureaucrats came to quickly eat their lunch with a thirst-quenching beer—no harm done; it was lunchtime, after all. A perfect atmosphere for my last minutes on earth, don't you think? I ordered a coke because I couldn't force booze down my throat without my daily dose of pharmaceutical drugs. In fact, although I didn't truly realize it, I was suffering from

withdrawal, physically and mentally. So what I absolutely needed were my anxiolytics!

Seated at a small table near the window with a parched mouth and a lump in my throat caused by my perpetual anxiety, I raised a toast to myself, “this is my last Coke...” To make matters worse, my mouth was so dry I couldn’t get the liquid down. I couldn’t drink a single drop of that wonderful brew (as bad as it is strangely addictive). It’s stupid, but at that point I started to cry. My body was in such distress that I couldn’t even take in food or drink. I was so very sad; tears ran down my cheeks. No one was looking at me, nor could they see me. I was alone in the middle of a noisy, turbulent sea of people where I had nothing to say to anyone and no one had anything to say to me!

There’s no worse solitude: being in the midst of a crowd of your peers, your so-called human brothers, feeling as lonely as someone shipwrecked and alone in the middle of the ocean. Well, for someone like me who loves melodramas, that was just what I needed and more!

I didn’t dare make eye contact with anyone. I had the impression that I looked so sad, so scared and tormented... that I was bound to upset all those good people, so ordinary and stable! I stared at the table in front of me to keep from disturbing them, those real human beings who seemed happy

to live despite their stupid, monotonous lives... «Happy are the empty-headed...» I thought condescendingly, mulling it over with fake intellectual humility.

I was too intelligent to be happy, too accustomed to existence in this mediocre human condition that our declining society had laid out for us. My mind had already figured it all out. I couldn't be satisfied with the absurd little pleasures that seemed to satisfy most of these silly, naïve people. Aren't I proud? Yes, but when you're in that condition, you don't even realize that pride is the cause of loneliness and often the reason for most sorrows. And after all, when you are genuinely unhappy, it helps to believe that it's because you're too intelligent, rather than the other way around (A slap in the face for Verlaine and the wretched modern-day poets, myself included, who think they are intelligently unhappy and painfully misunderstood).

At 1:25, I struggled onto my feet and bashfully asked to pay for my drink. In my paranoia, I thought the barman was throwing an accusing scowl my way and that, above all, everyone resented me for feeling uncomfortable in my skin. It was as if I was revealing to people a hidden aspect of themselves they did not want to acknowledge. By denying it, we pretend that loneliness may forget us; that we can

avoid it up through our old age, that death will provide the ultimate escape for us, poor, unhappy, make-believers, lost in a confused life of cop-outs and camouflage worthy of a chameleon.

But I had lost my protection. I was a wretched soul, who little by little pulled back each layer of skin, from the epidermis down to my very flesh, skin stripped off by vodka, metaphysical thoughts, whiskey, a senseless universe, barbiturates, the horrid general relativity of Einstein, by a multicellular life of which I was a sad product... And of course soft drugs that distorted all the data in my poor, sick mind (Oh! Marijuana... so gentle, but so enveloping that it transports you to a world where paranoia reigns absolute).

I felt that my body, my soul, my organs, my cells hated me desperately for this awful state I had reduced them to, in which they stewed throughout the day. So they decided to make me pay the highest price—slow torture! The goal: self-destruction. Like the delete key on a computer: when you hit the button, that's it, everything is irrevocably destroyed. In my case, there was no longer any PAUSE button.

When I finally left that charming café, I had a pounding headache and my ears couldn't make sense the sounds of life around me: footsteps, cars... I was losing more and more of my animal instinct, the instinct for self-protection, and

the indispensable instinct for survival.

I moved towards the lobby of the first doctor's building, keeping my head low so I wouldn't make eye contact with people passing by and ultimately upset them with my discomfort. I didn't dare to bring any attention to my existence. My constant depression forced me to be discreet. However, like all alcoholics, all it took was my dose to become loud, rude, and rowdy.

Finally, I entered the doctor's office and found an unfamiliar pot-bellied, round-faced little man, probably from North Africa. He didn't look like an Arab, more likely a pied noir, no doubt Jewish, like me. But on that day, I wasn't a Jew or a pied noir; I wasn't French. I was no longer part of the human race; I now counted myself among the living dead who had lost their minds in the bottomless black hole of despair. Desperation has no religion, no nationality, no life, and no utility.

I didn't dare look straight at the doctor. I mumbled a few words, stuttering and sweating with nervousness. I even tried a clever little buddy-buddy smile when I talked to him, but it didn't look like he was going to buy my story.

He stood looking at me with apparent concern, and suddenly, out of the blue, he asks if, by any chance, I was brother of one Martine, the wife of Simon B.

Unbelievable! Just when I want to be totally anonymous (because, when you are committing suicide, you want a little privacy, after all), the first doctor I consult in preparing for my miserable death is a friend of my sister and my brother-in-law. Why is there always some burlesque detail, even in the most dramatic situations that breaks up the solemn aura of the moment? I wanted at least some melodrama! This is not a circus, not vaudeville; it's my life that's taking place and that's at stake here, for Christ's sake!

In retrospect, I have to admit, at that point, I didn't really think it was funny. I was actually perturbed and embarrassed about having entrusted my desperation to this doctor who had gone from being a total stranger to a friend of the family in just a few seconds. Thanks, whoever you are up there. What an embarrassing situation of self-mockery. If it doesn't put you out to humiliate me a bit more, go right ahead. Don't think twice. I'm right here. Even when I want to commit suicide, I get no respect; no one takes me seriously. I get the impression that people think of me as one of the pathetic protagonists who often fill up Woody Allen movies.

I wanted to shout to the sky, «There are people who are killing themselves here. Can't we even get a little respect?» Like the motorcycle couriers in Paris who have been shouting the same thing at drivers for years, «Hey, get a move on. There are people working here. Show a little respect. Damn it!»

At long last, the doctor understood that I absolutely needed those drugs. He prescribed a few boxes for me, but he was still not really convinced. He would have liked me to start psychotherapy right away. I said yes to make him think I agreed with him and also to put an end to the discussion. How could I tell him that the only reason for my visit was to get my hands on as many anxiolytics as possible so I could quietly kill myself by falling into a sweet, soundless sleep, like a contented child, free from physical suffering?

What I really wanted to do was to scream at him: psychotherapy isn't what I need! I need a new brain, a trade-in for a brand-new, standard brain, like changing the engine in a car! Throw the other one in the trash. There must be dumpsters for brains that don't work properly, the ones that have some bug from the factory... All of the best manufacturers are humble enough to recognize that sometimes things can go wrong. Every week on the radio I hear, «Please bring back all vehicles belonging to these models... serial numbers beginning with... they will be exchanged for a new vehicle.»

So, why doesn't God do that for me?

I wanted a new brain with no ghosts, no anxiety, no fears, and no invisible, diabolical enemies in the form of thoughts; one different from the brain whose only objective was to see me land in a psychiatric hospital, clad in a first-class straitjacket, surrounded by padded walls to protect me from myself and from my own sick mind, poor ass that I had become!

By the end of my visit, the doctor had also prescribed a little bottle to help me sleep. I was to take eight drops only (certainly no more than that!) before going to bed. Well, he didn't need to remind me of that! This little bottle would serve a great and noble cause for my last trip towards the kiss of death! Thank you, dear local doctor. You've done a favor to a great man (meaning larger than life in suffering and selfishness). My dear friend, you are doing the entire country a favor and General de Gaulle himself thanks you personally and salutes you on my behalf!

I left the doctor feeling a little worse than when I came in. I headed for the pharmacy across the street. The woman behind the counter looked at me with a mix of sadness and disgust. I hate that kind of false compassion from someone who looks at you with a distasteful expression that means, «Oh, that poor dear... Thank God, I'm not like him.» To hell

with all of you and your bogus pity!

I picked up the prescriptions and hurried off to tell the same tall tale to the next GP. Earlier that morning, I had chosen several doctors to be sure I would get enough drugs to pull off my life-saving suicide successfully.

I arrive at the office of the second doctor, well known for his accommodating consultations and sick-leave certificates. I'm greeted in the waiting room where a lot of people, mostly North Africans, are waiting. Are they more fragile or sicker than others? Or are they special friends of the neighborhood doctor? (I, as a Jew from North Africa, should I be riddled with all the diseases? Is that why I feel sicker than everyone else, why I spend so much time in doctors' waiting rooms? Finally, that explains everything...)

It's funny how I wrote "North Africans!" Here I am using a politically correct term so I can talk about Arabs without sounding a racist. Is it racist to say Arabs? The same holds for the word Jew. It sounds like an insult. That's why some people say Israelites, Israelis, or "of the Jewish persuasion."

But I'm not a racist. Or maybe I am, but against all the fascists, the pigs, the bastards who want to impose their ideas,

their viewpoint on others, against men who beat and harass women, children, and animals so they can puff up their chests and feel as if they are more dominant and stronger than others. Oh, I am prejudiced against those people! I don't like Arabs who act that way. It's true. But I don't like it when Jews or Frenchmen or anybody else does the same!

Moreover, whatever my origins, there are some Arabs I like a lot and some Jews I don't like at all (and vice versa)! Most of the Arabs I know are sensitive, sympathetic, humane people. One of my closest friends and someone whom I really consider like a brother is named Samy El Ouardani. He is a Tunisian Arab and a Muslim. And he is one of the gentlest and kindest people I have ever had the good fortune to meet.

I personally don't feel that I really belong to the Jewish community. I feel that I'm a citizen of the world, and of the universe! We have no idea how many planets there are out there. Billions probably. How many of those planets are inhabited by sentient beings who, like us, are more or less evolved? For that matter, why should we care about the origin of the beings we have met or will meet? What matters is their capacity to understand and love others, whether they are part of the human or animal race or any other! Kindness and humor, for me, take precedence over any other criteria. What's important cannot be seen by the naked eye. What's

important is the soul, that thing which cannot be touched but which causes us love or hate someone, as demonstrated in Saint-Exupery's wonderful *Le Petit Prince*.

I love people for their sensitivity and their inner beauty; the rest don't really interest me, whether they are Jewish, Arab, English, American, Martian... I reserve the right to say that I don't like certain types of behavior that would be considered typically Arab or typically Jewish or typically American without worrying about being called racist, anti-Semitic, or anti-American. In any case, I have something of all three cultures in me.

I don't care for religious people. I don't like fanatics either. But religious fanatics are the one category of people that totally exasperates me! They often take advantage of a misinterpretation (or their own interpretation) of holy books to dominate and manipulate their wives, their families, and others around them.

It took so much courage and tenacity for women to gain their independence and their freedom, that it truly sorrows me to see them demanding the right to regression because of religious practices, family constraints, or some need to highlight their differences! And these religious practices only correspond to the trappings of religion! Religion is something that must be lived on inside. The difference should

be seen from the inside out, not the other way round!

The women I feel the worst about are those who blindly obey rigid constraints, who completely cover their heads and bodies with scarves, wigs, and other symbolic tokens of submission (standard practice for Orthodox Jews and Muslims). It's like seeing a crocodile in a leather workshop or a beautiful stag willingly walks past a horde of hunters thirsty for trophies made out of the heads of poor animals killed for just that reason.

There are some things I simply don't understand in this world, all these people acting against their own interests, their own sensibilities and fighting their own intrinsic freedom. Those are the people who seem to me to be of another race, another religion, not people who come from different countries or have different traditions.

The end of my first rant...

I waited impatiently for my turn in the second doctor's waiting room where the atmosphere was less than pleasant. Whispering, noises, comings and goings, and smells that

made me think more of a Social Security office (as Jacques Chirac so elegantly put it) than a doctor's waiting room. I was feeling increasingly ill, queasier with every passing minute. I was very uneasy and tried to avoid eye contact with the people around me. It had been 48 hours since I'd taken an antidepressant or any other of my pills, so I was in the horrible grip of withdrawal.

Suddenly, I had a very practical idea: while I was waiting to swallow my 200 anxiolytics to implement my pre-planned passing, nothing was stopping me from going to the toilet and slipping down a well-deserved dozen or so. That way I'd feel less anxious and a little less stressed about talking to that kind, accommodating doctor.

By the time it was my turn to see him, the antidepressants had begun to go to work on my body and mind. Suddenly I felt more relaxed, more easy-going, I wanted to enjoy myself, to laugh... I was almost euphoric.

The doctor politely asked me to come into his office and, with a sober, serious look on his face, asked what the matter was. I tried to explain as best I could but... all of a sudden, I started giggling under the effect of the drugs. I'd get out a few words while trying to remain straight faced, and then I'd burst into laughter again. I apologized stupidly as I broke out laughing... It was almost enough to make me cry.

The craziest, most ironic aspect of it was that I was trying to explain my black, desolate mood to the doctor in front of me and how I needed antidepressants urgently to keep from falling into a deep depression... but I couldn't stop laughing. He gawked at me wide-eyed without smiling, actively ignoring my fits of laughter as if he hadn't noticed. Then he complacently gave me the prescription I needed for my dear suicide. I hurried out of his office, trying clumsily to hide my giggles. Even today I wonder what that doctor thought on seeing me in that state. My behavior was in total contradiction with my "patient-in-distress" story, but he'd probably seen worse. As Jacques Brel* said, «Next!»

After a quick trip to another pharmacy for more ammunition, I finally got back to my parents' home with a shopping bag full of wonderfully crisp, nourishing pills. Fortunately, no one was home: my family had gone on vacation and my brother Michel only showed up for a few hours every other day or so between his time at the clubs.

Half stoned, I wasn't even depressed. I felt more playful, fully intoxicated by my recent, heavy consumption of pills, the result of course from a 48-hour withdrawal. But at the bottom of my heart, I knew very well that this euphoric condition was not going to last. Once the effects of the drugs wore

off, my existential fears and anxieties would overwhelm my mind again. This I knew, because I had been through it hundreds of times before. Why would they give up such easy prey? Like the AIDS virus: it's practically for life... or more accurately for death!

I emptied all the boxes of Temesta onto the table and made a lovely little pile of pills shaped like a pyramid as if the aesthetic presentation mattered at a time like that. Then I took a bottle of crystal clear vodka and poured myself a full glass. I placed a dozen pills in the hollow of my hand and swallowed them with a big swig. I did the same twice over, determined as ever to put an end to my grim, wretched existence!

On my fourth handful, the phone began to ring. At first, I let it ring two or three times and then finally decided to pick it up, not so much to answer the phone call as to stop the damn ringing that kept on jangling my brain circuits. I was getting groggier because of all the crap I had swilled down by the end of that crazy morning.

I heard the voice of my friend Edouard, emerging from some kind of radio static. «What are you doing tonight?» he enquired. What could I possibly reply with? «Nothing special, just a little suicide. What are you doing, buddy?» I obviously preferred to say that I was busy with a lot of different stuff.

He was surprised by my drowsy voice (not surprising after swallowing more than 50 Temesta).

He wanted me to join him at the jewelry store because he was with two cute girls, one of whom apparently had seen me before, and she seemed interested in meeting me. She must have been struck by my looks because we had never actually spoken. «I can't. I absolutely have to finish this thing I've already started,» I told Edouard. A little later in the conversation he quite cleverly asked whether I might be able to postpone what I was doing, which made something click in my head. «Why not, after all,» I told myself, «I can finish off my suicide tomorrow! There's no rush. Nobody's waiting for me up there, and even if someone is, there doesn't seem to be any special hurry! I'll still be alive enough (no less than today in any case) to commit suicide tomorrow as I had promised and end my miserable life! So why not enjoy this lovely evening, which chance has sent my way, with a pretty blonde on my arm one more time? It would be crazy to refuse. I had such a terrible time last night that I deserve a little fun!»

My mind was completely hazy after all the drugs I had taken, but I took out my cute white convertible and drove through Paris at more than 178 km/hr. The police photograph and the ticket I got later attested to my madness—a type of lunacy that was as dangerous for me as it would have been

for any unlucky pedestrians who might have crossed my warpath, staring into the lights of a car managed by an unmanageable man.

Edouard and the two girls were waiting for me in front of the jewelry store. Polite, yet brief introductions were needed... I was so stoned from my booze-drug concoction that I couldn't really see the features of the blonde's face. She might as well have been wearing a veil. All four of us took off in my glamorous convertible with our hair blowing in the wind. (in my case, with my brain blowing in the wind). *La Dolce Vita*, I thought idiotically.

We decided to go into a pizzeria near Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where I drank wine and liquor all night. I barely touched my food because eating would sober me up, and I was feeling too good in my drunken state to make that kind of mistake! Can you imagine? For once, I had gotten rid of the demons who were always badgering me, and who delighted in injecting negative thoughts into my neurons. It was pure bliss!

We went onto a trendy club for the rest of that incredible evening. I ordered a bottle of good vodka. "Nice and cold, please, with ice." I just wanted to show off like a would-be connoisseur, even though I was well past the point where I could tell the difference between vodka and any other boo-

ze. I drank nearly the entire bottle on my own, pretending to be having a terrific time, but I was so drunk that I stretched out on the bench after kissing the poor girl who didn't seem to be too upset by my condition.

To this day, I don't know how I managed to drive through Paris in that state, drop the girl off at four in the morning, and get home again. I remember that my eyes were mere slits and that I could hardly tell the difference between stoplights and neon lights.

I finally got back to my apartment at 11 Rue de l'Ourcq in the nineteenth arrondissement, a place for working class people like me! My neighbor's dad was a garbage man, and mine, whom I adored, pumped gas. I pulled up in front of the entrance to my building, opened the car door, got one foot out and then the other, but there was no way I could stand up. I decided to crawl on all fours, but even that was too hard. I began to crawl along, more like a crocodile than a snake. Luckily I lived on the first floor – like any self-respecting drunk, it took me a good twenty minutes to put the key in the lock.

I was finally at home, wait... at my parents' home, in that "wonderful cozy setting." Before going to bed, I suddenly remembered that the kind neighborhood doctor had said, «Before going to bed, my dear sick friend, take eight drops

of this miracle bottle. Eight drops, no more...” After that, apparently I would sleep like an angel. I grabbed the magic potion, but I was too tired and too drunk to count drops, so I just took a clumsy swig, and almost finished the bottle. It doesn’t matter anyway, I thought, I’ll sleep that much better, and I have a whole night’s sleep to catch up on! (There is no limit to madness!)

That was what had really happened 48 hours before I woke up so sluggishly in my parent’s apartment. I understand the situation better now, and it was for that reason that I had slept so much.

There I was, draped in the armchair, waiting for the effects of the various drugs I’d taken two days ago to wear off so I could finally get up.

I’ve talked to a doctor about this episode several years later. He told me that with everything I had swallowed, I was surely on the verge of death and am lucky to be here today to talk about it. Many people in similar circumstances weren’t so lucky! Suicide... the primary cause of death among young people. At the time, I was just 20 years old.

I stayed put, sprawled in that armchair like a deposed king. I couldn’t move; I could hardly breathe properly. I let my life flash before my eyes, dwelling on everything I had done—or

not done, for that matter—that had brought me here, completely lost, facing the total defeat of my existence.

For me, the question was not why I drank, but how I managed not to drink all the time. To live with my sick mind, I had to be doused in alcohol and drugs from morning to night! No one can live with so many demons in his head without turning to tranquilizers and other forms of relief.

There is no pain in alcohol. Suffering for me came when I wasn't drinking. Without that drug, I felt empty, stupid, uninteresting, devoid of personality, with no depth and no soul. Alcohol was a vital need, like sap for trees or a blood transfusion for a patient. It brought me back to life as it ran through my body, my veins, my brain, my soul, my heart... All my organs felt alive again and could move in harmony with life, like a rusty motor, you add a drop of oil, and that's all it takes! The pistons start moving again. Thanks to this wonderful, redemptive liquid, my body could come back to life, my joints could bend, my organs could fulfill their normal functions, and my smile broke over my face. I was transformed, suddenly a skilled dancer up on stage. At last, rhythm was mine and coordination entered into my every move.

Many of my friends asked me why I became an alcoholic. I don't really know. Surely it was because I was uncomfor-

table in my own skin; I didn't want to be myself; I wanted to be someone else. In fact, I was too shy, too sensitive, so easily hurt, and with too many complexes, too tense and too empty at the same time. Actually, I drank because alcohol had a strong effect on me. After one or two drinks, mixed with a few anti-depressants, I would be so high that I always wanted to drink more, to maintain that surreal, mystical, and uninhibited condition in which my neuroses suddenly floated away. After a few drinks, I suddenly didn't have any more hang-ups. I would instantly switch from an inferiority complex to a superiority complex, destabilizing the people around me who couldn't tell whether I needed affection or a good kick in the ass (a bit of both at different times).

An American scientist apparently has discovered that there is a gland that reacts differently in the presence of alcohol from one person to another, just as sugar affects diabetics. If these same people are a fertile seedbed because of a weak or destabilized personality, they will try to use the lack of inhibition that comes with alcohol to create another personae. But it will be based on this supplementary element, a chemical element, a substance modifying behavior and reasoning... which will always be needed if it's not absorbed (example: Gabriel + nothing = nothing; Gabriel + booze = Mr. Hyde, super cool).

That was exactly my case. I felt unsure of myself, and boo-

ze gave me the courage I lacked to express and assert myself. Without alcohol, I felt excluded and full of complexes, pretending to be happy because I was afraid that people would run away from me. My timing was always off, my jokes fell flat; I would get indignant at the wrong time. I was a ridiculous clown, a joker with no sense of humor whose inappropriate behavior made everyone feel uncomfortable. I had real trouble with moments of silence. I had to add something, to fill in the blanks, and I'd always take it too far. I felt like the bad moderator of some television game show trying awkwardly to justify his pay by unnecessarily adding another stupid joke. I was tiresome for people who loved me, and annoying for those who didn't!

I've always had complexes. I wanted to be blonde with blue eyes and straight hair. I wanted people to say, "Look, what an angel, and blonde too, just like a little angel." Instead, I was dark with curly hair, and it was easy to see my Middle Eastern origins. I wanted to look like a Westerner, French, English, or better still Swedish... but I was a Jew born in Tunisia! What a paradox for a little pied noir! And I hated that word "pied noir." In my mind as a child, it meant that my feet were dirty!

At that stage, the comment that really irked me the most was when people said pejoratively: pied noirs, they're just like Arabs, aren't they? (I always tried to find a way of get-

ting around that Arab origin). No dammit! Pied noirs are colonialists; we are French sent to occupy the colonies that had been conquered by soldiers at the behest of France! We were sent to serve France! No one ever understood! That was what truly annoyed me and got on my nerves.

I love Jacques Brel, Jean Ferrat, Léo Ferré, Georges Brassens, Barbara, Jean-Paul Sartre, Stendhal! I knew all the songs of “le grand Jacques” by heart. I could recite an entire song from his repertoire starting with a single word. I love literature, poetry, opera, exhibits, impressionistic and surrealistic painting, Van Gogh, Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, Salvador Dali... Imagine the disparity! Looking like an extra from *La vérité si je mens*, but possessing the soul of an oversensitive, haunted man!

Another little joke from my guardian angel, who has a strange sense of humor, you must admit.

I was so shy that in certain situations, when someone stared at me or made a comment about me in public, I would turn beet red. I could feel the blood pounding in my cheeks. I had the impression I was flushed red. I would stutter and sweat—the feeling was horrible! At times like that, all I wanted to do was save myself by running away, as fast as I could, as far as I could, to go hide in a corner, somewhere... anywhere, as long as no one could see.

I was really hung up about everything. I dreamed of coming from a bourgeois family with a father who was a doctor or a lawyer, a French, English, or Swedish national, anything but not pied noir. Not a Jewish pied noir, for pity's sake... please. There must've been a slip-up. Hey, you up there. You've got it wrong. Mistakes can happen, no problem. I don't hold it against you. We're still friends! Just admit it and then fix it fast! I can't stay like I am, help me, get me out of here. Don't leave me like this!

But no way, nothing, no response, not a sound, total silence... They were probably ashamed for having to face up to the real situation, face up to their colossal mistake. In the meantime, I was suffering. I wasn't in the right body and I didn't have the right brain, nor was I in the right community with the right family. Somebody help me, please! But nobody seemed to give a damn.

So I would drink to drown out the pain, and by drinking in an effort to become someone else, I ended up developing two personalities. I went schizo, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. There was the one who was too shy to speak out, who didn't know how to laugh or enjoy life, always awkward, tense and anxious. The other only had the courage to pop up when the jittery man in me drank down the magic po-

tion. Once he had slaked his thirst and fulfilled his need for drugs, Mr. Hyde would make his entrance and take over. He knew how to respond to any and all sarcasm while looking people straight in the eye. He could fire back in kind without blushing, stuttering or sweating. He even made everyone laugh when he got started. Boy, I loved that guy, and even admired him at times. He knew how to talk to women, to seduce them with a knowing, playful look. He knew what needed changing to improve the world; he could talk about philosophy. He gave me a chance to expound on all the books I'd read and all the poems I love! I could finally express my sensitivity without coming across as an awkward, blushing clod who spoiled everything!

That was at the beginning, when alcohol was my friend, my accomplice, and my crutch. Alcohol makes you feel like you can take on the whole world, that there is nothing you can't do! For example, explaining to the President of the Republic how to behave, how to run the country, or the world for that matter... nothing could be easier or more straightforward! The downside, you naïve pack of blind, narrow-minded drunks and druggies, is that when alcohol sets a trap, it doesn't show you its dark side on the first date! It starts by seducing you, enticing you with the power you will acquire free of charge with its support and companionship! A bit like the old Michel Simon/Gérard Philippe film, *La Beauté du diable* which seemed to apply so well to me when I saw

it again not long ago.

When I first saw that movie I had no understanding of the meaning of life. I didn't see why the hero refused Mephistopheles' proposal "to be powerful, strong and envied," even if others were to suffer! Suffering, after all, is part of life, and not really a problem, so in the end, tough luck for them. What is more, I wasn't the one who was going to suffer; the burden would be on others. And it was all for a good cause, the only important cause to my mind: ME! Me, my happiness, my hunger for power and recognition were all that mattered! I wanted to be loved, to be admired, to see people bow to my intelligence and my exceptional wit.

At that time, I would have jumped at the chance to accept that fantastic, generous proposal: The beauty of the devil—to be strong and powerful, to walk ruthlessly over others. Come to think of it, isn't that just what I was trying to do for years with the help of booze, but without any real success.

No need to go into the many times I slept in the rooms of women I have totally forgotten—their faces, their names, and even their existence! All the vomiting in nightclub restrooms, the little accidents on the road, the memory loss, the crying fits and the hideous mornings when, with a pounding head and aching soul, I felt so ashamed that I would rather have been dead! Frustration, anxiety, fear, tears, paranoia,

misogyny, depression, lies... I knew them all. I had every illness, every type of dread and sorrow: anxiety, paranoia, schizophrenia, megalomania...

By now you have a better idea of why I was ready to put an end to my futile existence. My life had no substance, no integrity, no authenticity. It was empty and phony—so much hot air! Even a breeze had more density to it. At times, I felt more useless than a fly. My anxiety rages so strongly sometimes I could hardly breathe without feeling a stabbing pain in my lungs and ribcage. A tight throat and cottonmouth is all I know, day in, day out. For however familiar it may have become, can you get used to such suffering?

Personally, I don't know. I never really could. I have always tried to resist, to struggle, to go down swinging, in all, to be a difficult foe to vanquish. But extreme suffering is an intense mental pain that you feel when you fall into its clutches and soon becomes so gnawing that it ends by tightening its grip around your throat like some giant octopus. At first it makes love to you. Then it rapes you every day, minute by minute... It becomes a demanding, ruthless mistress, whose spiky arms and sharp fingers pierce you like razor blades, down to the deepest part of your being, to your organs and entrails...

I remember a Pakistani artist who showed his paintings in Boulevard Saint-Germain. He displayed them with a sign bearing a slogan that hurt every time I saw it: "If you are not in tune with the world, then you are getting in the world's way!" I felt that it was addressed to me personally.

I constantly felt out of step with the world and couldn't really communicate with anyone. I was afraid to talk to my friends about my anxieties for fear they would run away. My brain wasn't working the way it should. I didn't have the right instructions; I had lost the user's manual. I loved life but couldn't manage to live with my fellow man without bumping into him and upsetting him, without saying the wrong thing and acting like a jerk.

When I finally managed to haul myself out of the chair after several hours of semi-consciousness, my eyes bloodshot, my face and my mouth still numb, nearly anesthetized (like the feeling of walking out of a good neighborhood dentist), I took a few steps in the living room, massaging my thighs to get the blood moving. Finally, I'd made it. I was back in the world of the living! "Welcome back, my friend!" The good life is about to start again just like before. Not to worry, nothing changed while you were away. What great news! All your fears, your anxieties, your terrors, your apprehensions,

your bad vibes and your demons, everyone is here. All your friends have made it to celebrate your homecoming. They are so happy to see their stupid, egoistic prey again! Magnificent, isn't it? Isn't life great? If that's not love, what is?

The telephone rang (thank God for telephones!) I answered with a shaky voice—I hated answering a telephone sober. A woman's voice was saying: "Are you okay? I was worried. I've been trying to get in touch with you since yesterday." It was Sylvie, the charming blonde from the day before yesterday. She wanted to invite me to dinner at her house that day if I didn't mind if her four-year-old daughter was with us. When you are desperate, you don't mind anything. You are more afraid that others will mind your lack of substance, your inner emptiness, your hollow, out-of-synch soul and personality!

Having nothing else to do, I stopped by her house around seven in the evening with a frozen smile on my face as I went in. She said politely that I didn't look as if I was feeling very well. I tried a second awkward smile, stuttered a few words of apology, and sat down at the table. She tried to make conversation and I tried to answer as best I could. In fact, my mouth was shaking every time I said a word. Her daughter was staring at me, surprised and unnerved by this strange adult who was so unsure of himself.

Sylvie was trying to keep up a conversation when suddenly I couldn't take it anymore. I broke out crying, sobbing buckets, choking on my tears like an unhappy child. In a gesture more motherly than sensual, she took me in her arms and tried to comfort me. Then she asked me to wait in her room while she put her daughter to bed ... that's just what I did.

When she came back in the room, she put her arms around me again as I cried softly for a few minutes, and then I spent the entire night curled up in her lap like a child too scared to leave his mother. She actually had to break my hold in the middle of the night so she could to use the bathroom.

I moved into her place and almost became her second child for a few months, just long enough for my inner wounds to heal. God, how I needed that tenderness! Then I left, ran away. As soon as people got too close to me, I couldn't stand it, so I would leave... I would disappear because their love smothered me. I couldn't love myself, so how could anyone else love me?

After leaving Sylvie's, I spent some months pretending that I was normal like everyone else. The role was a hard one, but fortunately, booze and pills helped a lot. Some days, I would wander all day long, choosing isolated, well-to-do neighborhoods in Paris where I would be sure not to bump into anyone I knew. But I did end up running into a few

people, and they would ask “Hey, how’s it going?” I didn’t know what to say. I thought that my unhappiness was so visible that I couldn’t hide it. For that matter, what could I say? “Well actually, I’m a mess. I try not to think about suicide too much, but it’s hard. I have trouble with day-to-day life, and my anxieties make it difficult to breathe.”

That was the truth. Although in no way did I have the courage to admit it to anyone! So, if I happened to meet someone by chance, I would stutter a few embarrassed words with a silly smile, and like Jacques Brel “I would apologize for not being more out of the way!” People would look at me with a pained expression that was a mixture of disgust and pity. These accidental meetings were painful for me. I hated being what I had become: a stupid, insipid buffoon, colorless, odorless, the epitome of nothingness, a puff of hot wind, a poor lost soul wandering through the streets of the city. I felt disconnected from other human beings. I couldn’t identify with anyone, and I sadly thought I was the only person in that condition! It never crossed my mind that other people might feel the same suffering. I envied everyone, including the sick, even those with cancer because they had the right to have their suffering recognized. Not me! I had no visible disease, which no doubt was why most people looked at me with revulsion and shame.

But I was sick, seriously sick. My soul was suffering, but

it didn't show in an open wound or an identifiable virus. Depression is a disease that is only really recognized when the visible symptom is expressed in the most ghoulish way, when the person suffering from depression tries to commit suicide—or better still, when he succeeds in the major feat of ending his poor, miserable life! Then everyone turns into a charitable soul. “Oh, the poor thing. He must really have been hurting to have been driven to that. The poor dear, I would really have loved to comfort him, to take him in my arms, to give him love and affection.” They should have done it before it was too late! Afterwards, he doesn't give a damn about your love and compassion: he's dead, disappeared, gone, reduced to nothing... Nada. So, get the bandages out when he's still just injured... not later, when it's too late! A dead person does not feel your love, nor does he want your support or the so-called affection that you had to give him before the ultimate act.

People should be taught to recognize the symptoms of distress, depression, anxiety and inner isolation! How can we help young people whose lives are a struggle, whose souls are bleeding while the hemorrhaging gradually drains away the invisible substance that forges the soul, the spirit that gives the soul density? I felt empty, just a breath of air, with no integrity, no density. I hardly dared to say hello for fear of disturbing people who seemed to live normally. My soul was gradually leaking like a wounded body, oo-

zing blood. But unfortunately for me, it wasn't visible like a bodily injury where trickling blood would have incurred general empathy. However, a soul that is spilling out, evaporating, is colorless, invisible to most people, save those who have learned to see with their hearts.

I felt so helpless, so alone, so disconnected from others, that I envied the entire world, everyone who didn't have the bad luck of being me!

SECOND CHANCE

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