

The Geste

A testimony — September 11

My name is François Joinneau. I was born in 1969. Officially, my father is unknown. I start with that sentence because it is the first stone. You are given a name. No one explains the other half of it. You grow up with that kind of silence the way you grow up next to a wall. After a while you stop seeing it. But you learn, without knowing it, to always walk a little to the side of it.

My mother carried a storm inside her that no one, for a long time, could name. Paranoid schizophrenia. Undiagnosed. Untreated, until 1997. Here is what that means, in practice. A child grows up in a house where reality can change shape without warning. He learns, very early, to become his own instrument for measuring the world — because no one else can tell him, with certainty, what is true. Some people call that vigilance. It is really an early school, with no diploma, in solitude.

In 1984, with a friend, I crossed paths with a man whose name is now tied to one of the longest series of crimes in French history — Francis Heaulme, one of France's most prolific serial killers. We got away from him. I will not describe that day in detail. Some chapters of a life do not need to be described to carry their full weight. It is enough to say that at fifteen, I learned that death can wear an ordinary face. And that survival, sometimes, hangs by nothing at all.

In 1989, I climbed Mont Blanc. I came down with frostbitten feet. You do not walk down a mountain the way you walked up it, once your feet stop answering you. I keep this image simple on purpose, because it says everything. You climb. You believe you have mastered the trial. And the trial leaves a mark you carry afterward, quietly, inside your ordinary shoes.

In 1990, there was a night when I wanted everything to stop. I am not writing this for effect, and I am not making it the center of this story. I am writing it because a testimony that skipped that night would be lying about everything else in it. But the night is not what matters. What matters is the morning after. And every morning that followed, where I chose — sometimes with very little conviction, sometimes with a great deal — to keep going.

In 1991, I went to Beijing. Tiananmen Square. A bicycle. A pale sky over the Forbidden City. I was still a beginner, in almost every sense of the word. But I was already politically lucid. Looking back, I believe that is where I first understood that a wall — the wall of a childhood, the wall of a country, the wall of a continent — is never a final fact. There is always, somewhere, a bicycle, a road, and the possibility of going to see the other side.

I tell this sequence of trials — an uncertain origin, a mother's unnamed illness, a death narrowly escaped, a mountain, a night in 1990, a journey — not because they set me apart, but because I believe they qualified me for a specific task: to build institutions that hold, in

places where so much in my own life first held together by a single thread. I spent the following decades writing a constitution for an Atlantic Union — seventy-three articles, seven titles — then imagining its continental extension, and finally exploring, through Seaquatoria, what a land might look like that belongs to no national storm at all.

It is not by accident that I am releasing this text on September 11. This is a day when an entire country experienced, on a collective scale, what I experienced on the scale of a single life: the fall, and then the question — the only one that truly matters — of what you choose to rebuild, and why. I believe a nation, like a person, is not defined by what collapses inside it. It is defined by the architecture it decides to raise afterward, and by how much strength it is willing to give that architecture, so that others can shelter inside it once it is gone.

This is my geste. It proves nothing by itself. No single life proves a constitution. But it may explain why I have spent mine writing one.

François Joinneau