

5150, rue des Ormes / 5150 Elm's Way

Crazy.

Such an ordinary word, used without rhyme or reason. But it is the first and only term that comes to mind at the moment. So I write it down. Too bad if it's a cliché. Anyway, originality is not what I'm concerned about now. I'm not an author. I'm a prisoner. Some will say there are similarities, but right now I don't have much of a head for theorizing.

Crazy, there you have it. Frankly, I can't think of anything better. After these last three days, I think I can claim to have developed a deep understanding of the meaning of the word.

Three days...

It's really rather ironic: I insisted on having something to write on, and now I have enough paper to copy out the entire Koran... and I'm completely empty. In fact, no, it's quite the opposite: I'm too full.

This is the first time I'm going to write about me. I have already written some little, insignificant poems, a few pseudo-intellectual short stories, but nothing really personal. Never felt the need. But now, yes. I need to get things off my chest, put my emotions, my fears, my questions down on paper... My hopes, perhaps.... If I ever get out of here (God! just writing those seven little words is so terrifying...), I'm not at all sure if I'll want anyone to read what I write. I'm not writing this for anyone else.

I want to just write for myself. It is my only possible escape. For now, at least. Just write down the events in order. That in itself will perhaps be very liberating. Maybe it will help me see things more clearly...

Okay. Here we go.

It all started three days ago. Or, to be precise, on Friday, September twenty-first, 1991. My classes at the Literature Institute were starting on Monday. I had only been in Montcharles for three days and, since I didn't know this town of 25,000 inhabitants, I decided to take advantage of the last nice days of summer to visit the area by bike.

So around eleven thirty, I start pedalling at a leisurely pace through the very quiet streets of the town. I go to the downtown, which is pretty but lethargic, stop for a bite to eat in a snack bar. Hardly a very exciting town. But since I come from Drummondville, it isn't too much of a culture shock for me. In any case, I intend to see Judith every weekend in Sherbrooke, only about twenty kilometres from here. So that'll

mean studying all week and partying all weekend. A normal schedule for any self-respecting student, right?

After dinner, I continue my exploration of the town. There are residential neighbourhoods one after the other, all alike, no originality. Most are nothing but a series of new, rather cold houses. I find myself in an area that is a little older and therefore more attractive, with lots of trees, no sidewalks and not much traffic. I turn onto a street called Ormes, which is a little isolated and more wooded. In fact, behind the row of houses, you can see a big field. A little pang of nostalgia: I grew up myself near woods and my happy memories from childhood are all still hanging from those branches and those trees, behind my parents' house. So I'm pedalling idly down this street, finding it more and more welcoming: widely spaced houses, pretty, not modern, a couple of people outside working in their yards...

Then finally the street ends at a yellow wire mesh fence on which a sign has been hung: END. Without getting off my bike, I lean against the fence. On the other side, there are a few trees, then a steep gravel slope that goes down about ten metres, to a narrow, brownish river. On the other side of the water, wild nature reigns. No houses and no roads. I stay a few minutes contemplating the quiet river, then look around me. To my left, a wide vacant lot, without any buildings. The houses only start again about fifty metres farther. To my right, near the fence, there's a two-storey house, a rather ordinary brown brick structure that must be about sixty years old. It does have a certain charm, a reassuring tranquillity. Maybe because it's a little more isolated from the others. I turn back to the river and take a deep breath. I feel good. I'm happy to be in this calm town. I think about Judith. I'll call her that evening. I'll tell her I'm happy. That I love her.

I turn my bike around and head off again.

My tires haven't rolled three metres when that damned cat appears.

To think some people don't believe in luck... There is absolutely no doubt that luck exists: I almost ran over it with my bike. It came out of nowhere, running a metre from my front wheel. I try to avoid it, but you can't avoid luck. I wrench the handlebars and I feel everything jam. My derailleur gives a grating moan and a second later, I experience for the first time the sensation of free fall.

I struggle to my feet, holding my arms and cursing like a union man. Except for a scrap or two on my hands and slightly skinned pride, I'll survive. I look around: nobody on the street and, in the distance, the two or three individuals working in their yards haven't noticed anything. Perfect. I can already feel my ego healing. My bike has been a lot less fortunate. The chain has come off, the handlebars are out of line and the front wheel is badly twisted. Since I'm the kind who breaks three fingers putting in a nail, I decide on a taxi.

Without even picking up the carcass of my ten-speed, I start walking towards the big two-storey house, the one that's a little isolated from the rest. More proof that luck like to play with us: if I had crashed a little farther away... nothing would have happened.

Nothing.

This thought alone is enough to make me weep with rage.

I see the cat disappear under the wire mesh fence. If I ever manage to get out of this nightmare, I'll offer a reward of a thousand dollars for anyone who brings me its skinned corpse. No, strike that: anyone who brings it to me alive. I'll skin it myself.

There are three ordinary windows on the ground floor; and between the second and the first, there's a door. On the second floor, there are also three windows. Strangely, the first one is darker than the others. Curtains? Doesn't look like it, no...

There's a yard on the left and another side door. I walk up the asphalt driveway where a car is parked. In fact, there's a taxi light on the roof of the car, an old brown Chevy. Well, well. I wouldn't turn down a little good luck.

I ring the doorbell. There's a big yard behind the house, surrounded by a high cedar hedge. Beyond, the woods.

I check my watch: two thirty. I ring again. The taxi parked in the yard convinces me to persist.

Finally, the door opens. The man must be in his early forties and he's a little shorter than my five feet eleven. He blinks, unsure, looking really surprised to see me. I explain to him what happened to me, pointing out the remains of my bike in the street. The man listens to me, a tad suspicious. The little brown moustache under his nose and the ball of curly chestnut hair on his head make him look a little cheesy, a Patrick Normand look. The typical suburbanite. He steps outside and looks towards the street. When he sees my bike, his ridiculous moustache curls up in a

wide smile and his suspicions dissolves.

"Ah! A bicycle crash!"

It seems to reassure him. I don't know why. He looks at me, still smiling, as if I'd just told him a good joke. He even starts laughing.

"Because of a cat! Ha, ha! That's a good one! If you'd hit it you would have come out of it better! I never trusted bicycles myself. More dangerous than cars."

My situation amuses him and I smile in spite of myself. He has a corny sense of humour, but he seems nice enough.

Nice...

I explain to him my idea of calling a taxi.

"I'm a taxi driver myself! What luck, eh? Only I'm not on duty this afternoon and... and I'm really busy right now..."

He looks like he's actually sorry.

"No problem... Would it be all right with you if I called one?"

He hesitates a moment, looking towards the inside of the house. He rubs his moustache for a little while, as if he's weighing the pros and cons of my request. Would it bother him that much? He's dressed in a pair of old jeans, an old t-shirt. There are stains on his clothes... He looks like he was in the middle of fixing something...

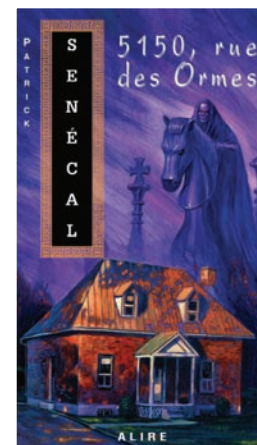
"Listen, I could go to the house next door if you're too..."

"No, no, of course not!" he exclaims suddenly, smiling again. "Come in, come in!"

I step directly into a big strangely decorated kitchen: green wallpaper with a pattern of mauve flowers, caramel brown cabinets and a corn yellow fridge. It hurts my eyes. To my left, a staircase, under which there's a door locked with a padlock, leads to the second floor. In front of me, near the stove, a wide opening gives access to the dining room.

The guy's starting to show me where the telephone is when the front door that I just came through opens behind me, and a woman enters. She stops short and stares at me in stunned silence. She's holding a little girl by the hand, who's standing at her right.

"Maude!" The guy seems surprised. "Your walk didn't last very long..."



He says this, looking annoyed, as if he was criticizing her. As for the woman, she's still staring at me. She actually looks scared.

"This young fella just crashed his bicycle, right in front of the house. Because of a cat!"

And he laughs. Obviously, my bicycle accident is an inexhaustible source of amusement for him. The woman finally looks reassured. A little, at least. She's quite tall, with greying chestnut hair cut in a square hairdo, not very pretty. Her smile looks a little forced. I guess her to be about forty-five, but her weary expression may have aged her.

"My wife, Maude."

I smile politely. She blushes, averts her eyes and says in a weak, but fast-talking voice:

"I'll take Anne to her room..."

The little girl, who must be about six, is tiny, thin, and she has long, black hair. She doesn't say a word and doesn't budge an inch. Really docile. She lets herself be led by her mother, until the woman, just as she's about to start up the stairs, stops abruptly and, hesitatingly, stammers to her husband:

"Unless... it's too early... for me to go up?"

The guy's expression changes. He suddenly looks ill at ease. In a forced voice, he asks:

"Ah, no, why do you ask?"

He accompanies this false question with an icy, disapproving glare. I have no idea what was going on, but I don't really like the atmosphere. I'm really not in the mood to witness a domestic row. I just want to call my taxi and leave. Finally, the woman lowers her eyes, looking confused, and climbs up the stairs, without letting go of her silent daughter. The guy turns to me. He seems to be in a good mood again:

"The telephone is in the living room. You go through the dining room. It's in the back. I'll go get your bicycle off the street. We can put it in the trunk of the taxi when it comes."

I thank him and he goes outside. Then I notice the little cuts on my hands are bleeding a little more than I realized. I go to the sink and turn on the tap. At that moment, the woman called Maude comes down to the kitchen and I explain to her that I want to wash my hands. She looks at me for a long while in silence, intimidated. Then I notice in the middle of her pale face two big, black, really magnificent eyes. Too bad they're so afraid. She finally says in her small voice:

"You should disinfect them too..."

"It's not really necessary..."

"Oh yes, or else they'll get infected..." "Go to the bathroom, upstairs, there's disinfectant... The second door on the right."

And she lowers her eyes, frightened and surprised at having spoken so much. As I climb the stairs, I see her open a cupboard, grab a broom and sweep the floor mechanically, as if she isn't aware of what she's doing.

I climb the steps. I imagine the kind of couple they are. He's the macho good ol' boy type, master of the house. She's the submissive wife, her life dreary and sad. Some clichés are persistent...

A long, windowless corridor runs the length of the second floor. I pass the first two doors, one on the left and the other on the right. Closed. A few steps farther on, I stop in front of another door on the left and put my hand on the knob. Just then, I remember that the bathroom is on the right, but I've already opened the wrong door. It's a bedroom and it's dark. I can make out the silhouette of the little girl sitting on the bed. She turns her head towards me.

"Don't be afraid. Your mom told me I could come upstairs. I was looking for the bathroom and got the wrong door. I'm sorry."

She looks at me silently and in spite of the dim light, I can see that she's very pale, as if she's ill. Which is perhaps the case... Besides, shouldn't she be in school?

"You're not afraid of me, are you?"

She stares at me, still without a word. Her eyes are huge and jet black, deep. Like the big pupils of a lifeless fish. Her pale face is flattened and elongated by her long ebony hair. Frankly, she intrigues me. What's she doing there, sitting all alone in the semi-darkness?

"You should open your curtains. The sun is shining outside..."

She doesn't move, not a hair, and still says nothing. And the way she's looking at me with her closed mouth, her big, staring eyes... I really wouldn't want to have a kid that looks like that. Definitely not...

I gently close the door again. She must be sick. That must be it.

There are two doors left. The one at the far end is closed and the other one on the right is open, revealing the bathroom. In a minute, I find the disinfectant, and clean and dry my hands.

It's when I return to the hallway that I hear the groan.

Not a sigh or a murmur, but a real groan. Of fatigue, of fear or of suffering, I can't really say. I think of the little girl, but a second manifestation tells me that it's coming from behind the door at the far end. I walk toward it, without feeling afraid yet. Why would I be afraid? When you're sure everything is okay, when you're starting classes in a few days, when you're going to call a taxi in two minutes and when this house seems completely normal, there's no reason for a simple moan to make you afraid. It could be anything! That's why when I hear the sound a third time, I simply knock on the door, calling out a naive: "Is everything okay?" On the fourth moan, I go ahead and open the door, slowly, already getting ready to apologize.

What an idiot! What business was it of mine anyway!

The first thing I notice is the walls of the room. They're bare and an atrocious, sickly green colour. And there are blood stains. At least, I see red stains and immediately I say to myself: God, that's blood! Was that the moment when I started being afraid? No, not really. Everything was happening too fast.

The room is totally empty, without a stick of furniture, without a bed, nothing. Just a light bulb hanging from the ceiling and someone in the corner, lying on the floor, face down. Pale blue shirt, faded jeans. And more blood, under the person, on the floor, much too much.

"What... what the hell happened to you?"

I have absolutely no thoughts in my head. I see someone who was moaning, lying in his own blood, and this question comes out all by itself.

The head is finally lifted. A man, and in spite of his face being completely covered in blood, I can see his imploring eyes turned towards me. His moan takes the shape of words and I finally understand: "Help me..."

Then I'm finally scared. And that fear is summed up in a single mental shout screamed silently by my entire soul: Get the hell out of here now!

I turn around and hurry down the hallway. I don't run, I don't know why, I just walk very quickly. In spite of my fear, part of me is saying that it would be foolish to run. Running would be a kind of confirmation that I really am in danger...

I see the stairway at the end, very far away. Suddenly, from downstairs comes the voice of the guy:

"You let him go upstairs? Dammit all, what were you thinking?"

"But... but you told me... you told me that I could go upstairs! I thought... I said to myself that if you'd finished, that... there was nobody there anymore..."

Quick footsteps climbing the stairs. OK, this time, I start running for real... but the guy appears suddenly at the end of the hallway and I stop short. We size each other up for a brief moment. His nice expression from before has given way to a mistrustful stare. He asks me where I'm coming from.

"From the bathroom. Your wife told me I could go upstairs..."

To my great surprise, my voice sounds perfectly normal. My face must not be doing too bad either because the guy hesitates, almost ready to believe me.

"Why were you running?"

"I wasn't running."

This time, my voice betrays me a bit. The guy screws up his eyes, then his gaze reaches behind me. I understand: he's just seen the open door at the far end.

"You saw him, didn't you?"

"Who?"

My voice sounds like a cracked flute. This isn't working at all now. He nods gently, his face dark.

"You saw him..."

Suddenly, I crack. My voice gets as shrill as a child's and I start to scream, flailing my arms:

"What happened to that guy? Did you do that to him? Why did you do that to him? Were you trying to kill him? What's going on here? You did that to him, didn't you, why? He's covered in blood, why? He... you... What's the matter with him? Is it you? Is it you?"

I shut up for a brief second... then I remark coldly:

"I'm leaving."

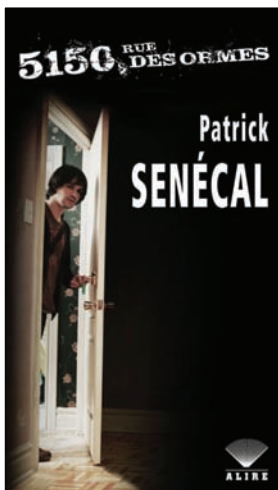
And I start walking forward again, convinced deep down inside that nothing can stop me from leaving. So much so that when the guy grabs me by the shoulders to stop me, I'm really shocked. Indignant. I start yelling that I want to get out of there right now, squirming like a child having a temper tantrum.

I see his fist go up, but I don't understand why. Stupidly, I think he's shooping a fly, or something like that. A second later, I receive my first punch in the nose ever. The effect is explosive. Everything starts spinning, and my vision goes blurry. As I'm reeling, I finally allow myself to admit that I really am in danger. You just don't hit decent people like that, espe-

cially when they've just had a little bicycle accident, an unfair accident too, caused by a damned black cat...

I feel the guy grab me bodily under my arms, drag me somewhere, with my heels trailing on the floor... No strength to fight back. I hear a door open... Then, I'm thrown... I collapse on something soft. A bed. I'm on my back, my vision is gradually clearing. Above me a face - long, white, disturbing - which is staring at me shamelessly. The little girl. I'm in her room. A ray of hope: in a soft, unsteady voice, I ask her to go get help.

"Anne!" roars a voice. "Get out of your room, now!"



The little girl doesn't move. I manage to reach a hand towards her. I'm still having trouble speaking. I repeat:

"Go... get... help..."

She stares for a long time at my hand, then her eyes turn back to my face. Two big, glaucous eyes - empty, without surprise, nor pity, nor fear, nothing. It's awful... Maybe I moan...

I hear a grumbling sound, half angry, half disgusted, then the little girl is pulled back. I close

my eyes, gather all my strength and finally manage to sit up, just in time to see the door of the bedroom close again. After a few seconds, I stand up. Terribly dizzy, feel like vomiting. I stagger to the door, turn the knob. Locked.

From the outside?

I pull on the knob, pound the door, shout for someone to open it. I quickly look around the room. A child's bedroom, but soulless. Decorated, but joyless. Dolls and drawings, but sad and dusty. I walk over to the window and pull back the curtains. The sun pours into the room, blinding me. I try to open the window. Impossible.

I look for something to throw, or a stick. There, a little child's chair. I grab it and throw it against the window. The chair bounces off with a strange noise, but not a single crack appears in the window. I pick up the chair again and hit it two, three, four times with all my strength. The window shakes, but doesn't break.

An unbreakable window.

I look at the window for long seconds, completely bewildered.

I press my face against the window and start yelling for help. But outside, opposite the window, there's only the vacant lot, and the houses, in the distance on the left, are too far away for anyone to see me.

Then I hear sounds. I move away from the window and listen. A door opening, to the left. No doubt the door of the room at the end, with the horrible green, blood-stained walls, where the... the...

Heavy footsteps in the next room. A crawling noise, little terrorized cries... Then, a dull thud. And another. Silence. Then something or someone is dragged. Past my door. Then, the guy's voice, out of breath and furious, shouting:

"Maude! I told you your walk was too short! Go for another twenty-minute stroll with your daughter!"

Ten seconds later, a door closes downstairs. The dragging sound immediately starts again in the corridor, moving farther away. Footsteps on the stairs, accompanied by little intermittent noises, thunk... thunk... thunk...

His head... The poor guy's head is banging on every step of the staircase...

This image launches me once again against the door and I start yelling again, begging for the door to be opened. I'm in a state of total panic: I'm appallingly certain that the guy is going to come back upstairs and treat me to the same hiding as the other fellow got. Then it'll be me dragged down the hallway, it'll be my head thumping on the steps...

I pound the door with both fists, screaming constantly, then finally I shut up, out of breath, and listen again. Someone is coming up the stairs. I back up a few steps, afraid, without ever taking my eyes off the door. Two seconds ago, I was begging for it to be opened, but now I didn't really want it to be... The footsteps come closer, accompanied by a little metal hiss, as if something is being rolled. The sounds go past my door. I guess that they were now in the terrible green room. I press my ear to the wall: muffled noises, wet rubbing. The room is being washed. The blood is being cleaned up...

I feel like I'm going to be sick...