

Falling through the cracks

What's wrong with society? What is wrong is people give up searching for the trust and sit back and blend in with the crowd. But that's not who I want to be. Blending in is not my thing.

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This was good, the sun would soon appear over the horizon and the first cars would begin parading down the street in front of his place. He always felt a particular emotion at this time of the day. He imagined people waking up, stretching in their beds, shutting off alarm clocks with sleepy hands. They would look around, a little lost, as though seeing their bedrooms for the first time. Then maybe they'd curse the daylight. Why so early? They're still tired. But duty calls. Some feel too important to stay in bed, as if nothing would work without them in this world full of incompetent people. Others feel they aren't important enough to stay in bed, that it may be better for their employer not to learn just how well things worked without them. In that instant, an entire armada of ants would simultaneously head for the washroom. It was sometimes scary to think about it. The machinery of a society, when the individual spirit dissolves to make way for the social phenomenon. When a multitude of minds, stirring up the same flux of information filtered by the tools of the media, seek to accomplish the same task in a near perfect homogeneous motion: working to insure the survival of society so that the next day will look a little more like the last. Of course there were parasites, but they were either crushed or labelled as "artists", or even "eccentrics", because giving them a name, a label, sent them straight back into the heart of the system. There was little left for them to do but play their role as artists or eccentrics; they just had to follow the rules established by the group. A vicious circle, yes, but there was a way out, a crack so small it was hardly visible. This crack, this infinitely tiny rift, he had found it.

That was why he found this time of the day so satisfying. At this very moment, he was savouring his victory over them. How had he done it? Each man is an island in the middle of the ocean. And he had a secret, which he would never reveal to anyone. He often wondered why it was so important for him to keep his secret. He'd spent many nights with his eyes wide open, consumed by the desire to reveal it, not because he wanted to be rid of the secret but because he wanted to share it with the handful of people for which he still maintained a little respect. He told himself that it was ignorance that caused these individuals, who were probably good people on the whole, to contribute blindly to maintaining the unhealthy balance that existed all over the planet. Some of them were different however, and they had to be warned, had to be shown that it was inhuman to go on like this. Finally, filled with remorse, his mind weak from lack of sleep, he had very nearly exposed himself by discussing his secret with the person who lived next to him, in the house where he was staying at the time. That individual, who we'll call Mr. X

to protect his privacy, was the only person he still considered as a potential candidate for salvation. But on that day, when he had finally gathered up his courage and gone to X's room, he found it occupied by someone else. When he complained, he was told that X no longer existed, that he'd left this world six months ago, deliberately. "How had he done it in an environment where everything was so closely monitored?" he had asked himself. X had begun letting his hair grow years earlier, on the pretext that he had become part of a sect. Unable to deny him his right to religious freedom, they watched as he patiently braided the cord he would later use to hang himself. His neighbour was dead, and there was nothing left to do but go back to his room with rage in his heart, regretting that he'd arrived too late. Didn't the turn of events prove just how right he was about X? X had taken his own life because he hadn't found the crack in the system. He had died because he was a good person and no longer wanted to contribute to society. That night, he fell asleep thinking that it was too bad that X had made his decision so early, before he had had the time to explain to him how one could stay alive and still make it through. He fell asleep with the sadness of not having been able to share his discovery. But when he awoke at dawn, his state of mind had changed completely, as though a revelation had come to him in the night. It seemed to him now, as clear as the words of a divine oracle, that his neighbour had died so that he wouldn't reveal his secret. It was a sign from God, that was obvious. The Lord didn't want him to share his knowledge, and the reason for that was as clear as the sky on a summer night. If he'd had the misfortune of talking to X, then two of them would have "known," which would have been like forming a group. That was precisely the danger, because that group would have had a name, and society would have quickly absorbed it. He had thus come to a greater understanding of the gift that he'd been given. The key was to belong to no group at all, even a group of people who tried to stand out. It might seem like a paradox, but he understood the unshakeable logic behind it. And if he alone understood it, that was all the better. His identity would be forged through a lack of identity. He must endeavour to become "no one", to make himself imperceptible.

But what did this objective imply? How do you become no one? If no one knows who you are, are you then no one? In a certain sense the answer was yes, because we are defined by the perception of others. In one's own mind, a man has no definition of himself, because he is the point of all comparison. He must attain that precise situation where no one could say who he was. In the absolute. Meaning, for instance, that a situation in which he could be recognized by someone on the street would be absolutely impossible. He could travel, move to a different city, a different country, or even a different continent, but the probability of being recognized would still remain. Infinitesimal, but still present. To eradicate this possibility, if he were recognized by someone, that person must believe themselves to be mistaken. He should not be who he was, not the son, nor the cousin, nor the friend, nor even the stranger met the night before.

He pondered a long time over the means to achieve this objective. For a long time, his thoughts took a wrong turn. He believed he had to change constantly so that every second he wouldn't

be the same individual he was the second before. But that required the effort to change. And this constant effort was unimaginable for a being of flesh and blood. He finally realized that to change he would have to preserve the memory of the individual he was previously, so as to make the appropriate adjustments. Which would have forced him to be two individuals at once. Because this change was ongoing, he would, in fact, be two people at every moment. But that wasn't what he was looking for at all! "No, he thought, it's really about being no one at every moment, as much for others as for himself. *Even he* mustn't be able to discern who he was. He had to forget who he was, and for good. This was an extremely difficult exercise, but not an impossible one. Besides, whoever said that a gift didn't require an effort?

He sat down to the task at hand: each day he must forget a little more who he was. At first, it was hard. He even needed to trick himself to succeed. He moved around constantly to disorient himself. The first thing, of course, was to evade the surveillance of the men in white who were watching his house, and to escape from the room he lived in next to X's. Each time he saw a familiar place, he managed to convince himself, through pure logic, of the contrary: it couldn't be the same place, since he was constantly on the move, walking in the same direction without ever turning back. Every time he had a doubt, he made a point of not delving into it. He cultivated doubt to the point of *becoming* doubt, of himself and of others. With training the human mind can perform unimaginable feats. But the hardest thing was to forget his own name. His family, if he ever even had one, disappeared into oblivion without him even noticing. Little by little his long-term memory was reformatted by his daily impressions in an inverted chronological order. Truth be told, he didn't even know if he had felt any pleasure watching the cars go by at dawn the day before. Here a clarification is required. Of course, it was pointless to try and forget what he had done, in fact it was practically impossible, but he could forget who he was. Therein lay the magic. Indeed, how could an action exist if its author didn't exist? By disappearing he made his actions disappear.

Certain memories wouldn't go away though. And he fought against them. He didn't talk about them. He was afraid to even mention them because they would automatically materialize in his mind, and one memory would bring forth another, and another, and so on... That was his greatest fear: he could still lose the battle as long as he hadn't won it, hadn't forgotten everything. He was scared to death of the thought of waking up one morning, perhaps following an unfortunate dream, and remembering everything. The only thing left would be to follow X's example and hang himself. He had in fact stopped cutting his hair years earlier, as a precautionary measure. You had to be ready to leave at any time. He was sometimes paralysed by the impression that a memory was about to resurface. He would then make an effort to occupy his mind by doing complex mental gymnastics. This led to all sorts of wild verbal excesses. Many times, he found himself standing in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of a deep conversation with himself under the suspicious eye of the people around him. He realized they thought he was crazy. Crazy! Him or them? If only they knew... But they would never know, poor souls. And if they laughed at him he would throw stones at them. They could all go to hell. Especially women. He threw stones at them even when they didn't laugh at him. Him, crazy?

They say we're all a little crazy. They're wrong. Everybody is *completely* crazy. Everyone but him. But since he didn't exist, it didn't count. This was neither a gratuitous statement nor the kind of compulsion that leads the majority of people to try to set themselves apart from the masses. No, he had a valid reason for allowing himself to judge them. It was their value system or rather the fact that they had chosen to have one at all. This desire to distinguish Good from Evil. Who did they think they were to say what was right and what was wrong. They dressed up their Manichean delirium with such attributes as *moral* or *social*, affirming that Good, while absolute, could vary according to the context. It was morally *wrong* to kill, but a killer could be killed because it was *right* for society. You couldn't deprive anyone of their freedom of speech as long as this freedom didn't infringe upon your neighbour's freedom. Prisoners were not free but their jailors felt no guilt for depriving them of their freedom. On the contrary, they felt that what they were doing was right. Generally, the punishment fit the crime, but a condemnable act in one case could be a laudable one in another. The justification, they maintained, was to be found in the motives. But when you dwell in the realm of motives, you get lost in the abyss of subjectivity. Subjectivity is therefore the very basis for all societal rules. And yet these rules were apparently carefully crafted to avoid just such subjective interpretations in an institution supposedly founded upon Cartesian values. So, does subjectivity disappear if everyone shares in it? Lao-Tzu said that abundance gave rise to the variability of the qualitative concept. Which implies, if everyone is in agreement, that it becomes impossible to compare and establish a scale. Consequently, consensus is an obstacle to a critical assessment of the true value of good and evil. These notions become absolute only because there is nothing left to compare them to. What a bunch of manipulators! Trying to make people swallow such nonsense was true madness! Or perhaps genius? Wasn't it the only way to achieve the desired outcome? A mindless people butchering sheep, cows and chickens but no cats or dogs because they are man's *best friends*. A people waving the human-rights banner is offended by the invasion of a territory and yet accepts that they achieved their hegemony through military intervention. "That was in the past, they say, the time of conquest is over." And yet they export their culture all around the globe thanks to military offensives disguised as humanitarian missions, because democracy must be maintained where it was once imposed, and forced upon where it is not yet established. Regardless, democracy is nothing more than a subjective consensus which only brings about liberty when we have arbitrarily accepted its implications. We are only free when we accept that liberty can be solely obtained through democracy. Here we go, another vicious circle. In fact, for many, democracy is synonymous with oppression because it means total supremacy of the majority over the minority. Everyone must follow the will of the majority: that's liberty! Belonging to a minority is never an advantage in such a system. And they want to export it to the four corners of the Earth. Ideology, democracy, and religion... the new weapons of war! And these people who maintain that religion is the path to salvation, while demanding a secular society. Even better, they condemn religious societies. Which is in itself an aberration. If secularism meant restricting religion to the private sphere, didn't it then become a form of religiosity? Because, when you think about it, wasn't a secular society forcing religion to remain a private matter much the same thing as a supposed "religious" one forcing religion onto the public body? How could one then talk about fighting to free a people from the yoke of a

religious authority in the name of liberty? Wasn't that simply exchanging one ball and chain for another? When he thought still more about it, he told himself that the concept of "religion" itself had no meaning outside a secular society, because it was from that distinction that we were able to advance a definition. If all the rules of society revolved around religion, wouldn't the idea of religion itself disappear completely? "The terrible thing, he told himself, was that everyone knew it." Everyone knew that education meant undergoing a form of conditioning; it's just that, well, everyone had decided to live in subjectivity. That was the incredible hidden agenda of the regime: bring its subjects to make voluntary choices through manipulation. In exchange, the regime offered protection from everything but itself!

But he'd gotten out, and he saw things clearly now. And though he found himself sitting on a cardboard box on the side of the road, watching the cars go by, he didn't exist, and was therefore free. Or almost. Yes almost, because how was he to eradicate the one memory that still wouldn't go away and threatened to destabilize everything?

How had it all begun? It was such a long time ago, although it seemed very near, crystallized in his mind, out of time. Having succeeded in erasing most of his memories, this one took on more importance, reflecting itself endlessly on the naked walls of his mind with sickening intensity. He saw images of another man, himself, when he still existed, when he was an active participant, and most of all when he felt things. Was it possible? That brilliant young man, devoted to noble causes, concerned about the future? One had to learn from the errors of the past, those that could be found in the books in the Faculty of Social Sciences' library that he knew by heart. But also those inscribed on the faces and in the actions of the people around him, a legacy of previous generations. He could almost feel people's pain, through certain details almost invisible to others, by the heaviness of their movements, by the hesitation in their words. People needed direction, a leader with reassuring clairvoyance. What if you showed them that they could make it together, that it wasn't necessary to use one's neighbour as a stepladder to get ahead? If they understood that the poor man wasn't diseased, that the Black man wasn't subhuman, that women deserved respect? If you showed them that despair and suffering could be expressed in ways other than violence and hatred, that fear was a normal feeling. Was it possible that he was that young man? There was so much love and passion in him that his heart began pounding in his chest and he clenched his fists. You had to give! He knew that the world would understand him and that although most people were blinded by life's difficulties, he wasn't alone in the battle. There were other men and other women who believed in it as well and who dedicated themselves to great projects, who protested against injustice at the cost of their own lives. There was one woman in particular. Less than a year older than he was, she was driven by a conviction that took his breath away. Always at the front of a protest, she handed out all kinds of tracts: "Liberate Angela Davis!", "United against apartheid!" She was magnificent! At first his idol, a model to be followed, she became the object of religious-like veneration. Then, before he knew it, Love! Because of their common beliefs, they became close. They understood each other perfectly. He found it easy to drown himself in this pure soul, and, like a fleeting spark of light in

his pupils, forget the world for a moment. How many hours had they spent with their fingers intertwined, in a crowd or alone in a secret place, gazing into each other's eyes, in complete silence, communicating through extrasensory channels, directly from soul to soul? Sometimes, it seemed like the space between them disappeared completely and they became one. Was it symbiosis or osmosis? No, there was no name for it, it was unique, something never seen before. And to think that never an argument disrupted the surface of the pristine waters of that pure lake! The scent of love followed her everywhere. Solely by her presence, she made all of his senses come to life. He had no words to describe the touch of her skin, its softness, its warmth. If ever he had lost his mind, it was then. When his tongue ran along the skin of the woman he loved, or when she melted into his embrace and he breathed in the scent of her hair. The scent of happiness. After making love, lying next to one another, their bodies still trembling, he would promise her the world. Not the one they lived in, devastated by war and misunderstanding, but the one they would build. She would remind him that, no, the goal was not to *change the world*, but to *bring about change*, even of the smallest kind. Because, with six billion people on the planet, if everyone did their part...

That's how she lived, between dream and reality. She herself was both: his dream and his reality. One day, she told him what her reality was. He was taken aback. She was alone. No, it wasn't about him, it was about the family she came from, her house, the people that, instead of encouraging her, criticized her. It wasn't normal for a good girl to go running around with groups of men. What did she like so much? Was it the smell of their sweat? Did the contact of their nervous bodies excite her? She couldn't stand the words that she heard every day. It was too much. When she was in his arms, everything was fine, but as soon as she got home, she felt lost, oppressed and claustrophobic, as though she were tied up in the trunk of a car. In those moments, she sometimes wished she were dead.

But he believed in her, didn't he?

Of course! If she knew what she meant to him, she would be frightened!

Well if he believed in her, he must trust her.

But of course he trusted her!

She was going to leave this place because she couldn't stand it anymore, and he had to leave with her. She knew he hadn't finished his studies and that they had decided that they'd wait until he'd finished before leaving, so as never to be separated, but now she had a unique opportunity and she wasn't going to pass it up. So he had to come.

He couldn't, it was difficult for him, especially financially. She knew that he didn't have a choice. Couldn't she wait a year?

No. There was a man who had promised her funding, and the project was starting right away.

He understood.

He could join her later. She would send him her phone number and address as soon as she knew them.

And so she left. And he waited, but she never sent her address. He didn't dare ask the young woman's parents for news of their daughter, because he knew that they didn't like him. For them, he was simply one of those scatterbrained youths who caused problems, broke shop windows, in short, disrupted the peace, one of those people filled with ideals but short on cash. Consequently, he wasn't good enough for their daughter. His strength had become his weakness, worse still, it had turned into a complex. He was afraid to meet them. He let a year go by. Like a kind of zombie, he wandered the city aimlessly, forcing himself to take routes that he'd never taken with her, which sometimes took him far out of his way. How could she have forgotten him? Had she planned it this way? Had she lost all feeling for him even before she had left? On the day before her departure, had she been embarrassed when he had held her hand? Maybe she hadn't left because of her parents but because of him? Or perhaps something terrible had happened to the woman who filled his dreams every night? He didn't want to think about it, but he had to be sure. He decided to do something and would ask himself for the rest of his life if it had been ill-advised. He went to see the young girl's parents.

The meeting went very quickly. The parents eyed him scornfully. They knew who he was, but they didn't like him any more than before, and maybe even a little less, finding his visit impertinent. How dare he show up at their home asking about their daughter? The father spoke: "What was she to him? Did he love her? If that was the case, he should think about her well-being instead of his own. What did he have to offer? What else did he have besides his cotton shirt and leather sandals? Didn't he agree that she deserved better? And if he didn't answer, that was fine, it was of no importance. She was married now, to a good stable man who took care of her and paid for her studies. He had even helped her get funding. This was real love, not some adolescent thing. She sent them letters in which she sang his praises. In fact one of these letters had arrived no later than the day before. They would have let him read it, then he could see for himself that she was well and happy, which was the point of his visit, but it so happened that the letter also contained personal family matters, and he wasn't indiscreet to the point of wanting to interfere in their affairs, isn't that right?"

He got up, excused himself and, with a faltering step, took leave of the parents and the rest of the world. She had abandoned him in the most vile manner possible. It was difficult to doubt the parent's sincerity. They had given him too many details and the facts spoke for themselves. So she had gone off with a man who was able to provide for her material well-being. He had lost her forever, because even if he found her one day it would never be the same. Her decision had turned her into a woman he no longer knew. He understood now why she didn't write him. She was ashamed. She had broken their dreams and become like all the others. He wasn't angry with her but with himself. How could he have believed in a world that didn't believe in him? When had he become so naive, so weak? What was he going to do with his life?

The rest was lost in a fog. Even this memory was vague, it was simply there, a part of him, reflected in his every action. Every time he held his head in his hands and cried, when he fled from one place to another, when he threw a stone at a woman to keep her away, it was this memory that appeared. Always there. How could he forget her when, in a small bag containing the remains of his former life, he kept the few love notes she had written him on the backs of political tracts, which were their sole reason to live at the time?

That morning, his sole reason to live was to watch cars go by and inhale exhaust fumes. It was in one of these cars that he saw, yes, the only face he was still able to recognize. He saw her behind the wheel of a small red car, and his heart began pounding against his ribs. He even noticed that she has slowed down, that she had turned her head toward him, surprised. He recognized the face. It had aged but it was the same, no doubt about it. It had only lasted as long as it took a car to pass and then disappear around the corner. What was he to think of this event? The answer was simple. It couldn't be her. It had to be a hallucination. He was losing his mind. It was obviously a sign from God. He would never be able to forget. His trembling heart had brought back these old feelings. And through this breach in his memory, his body was filling with long-forgotten emotions. He felt like he was losing his mind. Yes, he recognized where he was now. He was sitting across from the public square where years before he had held her hand on the night before she had left. But it wasn't possible: he had walked so far! And always in the same direction!

He was going crazy!

He had to end it before it was too late. His hair had become so long that it would make a good rope. He need only find a tree with branches of the right height and become its strange fruit.