

Leaving Berlioz

It was the summer that a hurricane had broken free from the heart of the Atlantic ocean. It carved a path eastwards, disrupting the patterns of the atmosphere to unleash its heavy gusts upon the Canary Islands. The ocean raged. During the storm, an Irish fishing boat disappeared off the coast of Morocco. The swell soon submerged the fortified Agadir wall, flooding the side streets of the medina. The windows dripped with sea foam. Further out, the wind whistled between the corrugated metal sheets of slums. Children cried. Pieces of roof were dislodged and carried through the torrid expanse of the Sahara. The storm, thwarted by the desert's high-pressure levels and scorched by the sand, was forced to head north. In a wave of immense heat, it crushed the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Lion, Languedoc, the Rhône Valley and, finally, the whole of France. In Paris, the sky grew cloudy. Bodies of cars disappeared under a layer of pink sand. Temperatures were in a state of total flux. As if held under a sieve, the city began to suffocate from the stream of warm, dusty Mediterranean wind. In the night, Parisians tossed and turned, their sheets drenched in sweat. The days were consumed by hours of fire: lifeless, motionless, without distinction. From one street to another, dogs walked with their mouths hung open, searching for the slightest bit of shade. The heatwave even found its way into the cellars. Imperceptibly, the air became thick with the odour of scorched asphalt. From the thresholds of phone booths, one could glimpse fatigued and asphyxiated figures tugging on the receiver's cord in vain.

The episode was brief. Emptied of its strength, the hurricane ran its course in the tepid waters of the Bay of Biscay. The climate's clockwork resumed its natural rhythm; summer ended along with the storm. No one knew how to dress anymore. All of a sudden, the leaves of the plane trees turned pale. The days flew by in the blink of an eye, autumn wasn't far. A cold autumn, bathed entirely in a meagre and anguished light. Large clouds filled up by the Atlantic ocean rolled constantly over the Paris Basin, breaking in the north: sometimes up to Yvelines, sometimes beyond Seine-et-Marne. Umbrellas collided on the pavements. Scooters kicked up geysers of dirty water in their wake. Beneath porches and car park entrances, drenched bike messengers hastily smoked a cigarette before heading back out on their rounds, stubborn-faced. At times, the ceiling of clouds was torn apart and replaced by a brief sunny spell. An oblique sun expended a few of its rays on the surface of the Seine. Paris became one of Monet's oil paintings. Tourists took out their cameras. People were determined to have one last coffee outdoors, faces tense, collars turned up to their ears, clutching onto the pages of a newspaper crumpled by the wind. Then, evening came, and everything was drowned in the grey of the walls.

A long winter without snow followed. January dragged along under the weight of the prison-like sky. February was hardly more forgiving. Little by little, the atmospheric pressure crept back up. That was until the long-hoped-for anticyclone unexpectedly withdrew to the Arctic, producing a cold wave over Europe. On the final Monday of that month, a snowstorm swept

across Finistère, engulfing the hills of Perche and rushing into the plains of Beauce. The storm descended upon Paris in the late afternoon. No one had seen it coming. Serge Bailleul wiped away the first snowflakes from the visor of his helmet at Porte de Champerret. He was en route to pick up a delivery at Levallois and drop off another at Puteaux, completely unaware that in two hours he would leave his Vespa in ten centimetres of snow, on the other side of Paris, in Pantin. If truth be told, no one was to know the extent of the chaos that night would bring: the traffic jams, frenzied beeping of car horns, and vehicles left abandoned. Three hundred and fifty kilometres of immobile traffic. Île-de-France trembled in fear under the snow. At around seven, through the thick fog, the awkward slalom of a pizza delivery driver could be glimpsed every so often. The ring road, the motorways, the intertwining secondary roads: soon nothing moved under the storm except for the sweeping of windscreen wipers. Three hundred thousand commuters readied themselves to spend the night in the confines of their vehicles. Those less fortunate would not return home before dawn. That much became clear when Serge Bailleul finally received permission to clock off, despite not having finished his rounds.

He embarked upon the inner ring road. Cars were huddled against each other, bumper to bumper. Serge Bailleul drove in second gear, scraping away snow with his feet amid clouds of exhaust fumes. The beams from car headlights pierced through the snowflakes like millions of stars. He could no longer see anything. He trembled from the cold. The surface of the road was more slippery than a puddle of oil. He hadn't even gone through Port de la Chapelle yet. Beneath his helmet, his eyes darted like those of a hunted animal, envious of the drivers in their cars, their faces visible in the briefest instant at a three-quarter angle. Heating, windscreen wipers, cigarette lighters, radios, it seemed to him that all the benefits of civilisation fitted inside a car. Half an hour later, he put down the kickstand of his Vespa. Exhausted by a day of driving as endless as one of Europe's longest rivers, he had managed to reach the outskirts of Pantin, at the foot of a hill in Romainville. This was the end of the road. Any further and his back wheel risked skidding down the slope. He covered the last kilometre on foot. The wind had eased up. Snowflakes danced lazily in the halo of the streetlamps.