NO BOX FITS ME

For those who labeled me insane

The autobiography of Sebastien Ageorges

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FOREWORD BY MÉLANIE SOULIÉ

Writing the foreword to this book.

It's an honor, and it touches me more than I can say. But it's also a delicate thing. Like brushing a rose with your fingertips, trying to feel the soul of the flower while hoping no petal comes loose. You have to be fair and simple, not distort the subject, stay as close as you can to the text and to the memories. To our memories, sometimes.

Seb.

We've kept track of each other, closely or from a distance, through all these years. Time has worked its way into our lives and woven a bond between us. We roamed the streets of Olivet setting the world to rights, looking for what was Right and what was Beautiful. Talking philosophy, science, religion, politics and schoolyard gossip, and trying out our first experiences of life together.

Seb, the friend who was always there, no matter the time or the distance. We drifted apart, then found each other again.

I admired you then and I admire you still for that ability you have to bounce back, to never give up, to refuse what everyone wanted you to believe about yourself. The teachers, the classmates... So much talk that didn't deserve to be remembered. You seemed to openly laugh it off; nothing seemed to reach you.

And then you left...

Canada and the polar bears... it was always your dream, and you made it real. You left to fight, and sometimes to struggle against everyone and everything, against all those who didn't believe in you. I remember our teachers telling you that you would never amount to anything. You went off on your adventure with next to nothing, not even your baccalauréat, a spelling mistake in every word, and you succeeded a thousand times better than so many others.

And today you're writing a book.

Your leaving was hard on me. I thought about you often and I missed you a lot. I still miss you, actually. Tears come as I write these lines, because the affection I have for you is sincere and honest. And reading you, reading your autobiography, brings back so

many memories, but also so much that was unknown and mysterious, that always surrounded you, that it feels like a corner of the veil lifting a little in the breeze.

After all these years, the suffering you went through and the sleeves you rolled up, you're stronger than ever.

This book is the testimony of a life. Written with sincerity and without artifice. It's the expression of thoughts crashing into each other, and an attempt to explain the brain's abrupt, shifting inner movements.

Composed and presented like a medical treatise, the writing flows and turns out to follow the rhythm of the years and of the psychological phases. It's both disorienting and surprising. A self-analysis with that Cartesian outlook that has always been so like you.

It asks questions about mental illness, about ourselves too, about our darkest depths.

To all those who want to feel a little less alone in moments of doubt, to the curious who wonder about the mechanics of the mind, and to everyone else:

you'll probably be thrown off, but you can't help being moved by this testimony.

This autobiography is one to read in order to open up to the people around us.

Enjoy.

PROLOGUE

To the ones we label too fast

I wasn't sure I'd actually publish this book. Telling almost your whole life story, there's surely some courage in that, and surely some shamelessness too; I still haven't done the math. For a long time I waited for someone to do it for me, a neutral witness, a kind psychiatrist, a friend who writes well, or even a slightly wiser version of me. Nobody showed up.

So when I lost my job, I sat down and I wrote.

This book diagnoses nothing and cures no one. It's the testimony of a man living with ADHD, giftedness and bipolar I disorder (yes, all three at once), who has spent years trying to understand what goes on inside his own head, and then to accept it, which is a whole other story. Understanding, I've more or less managed. Accepting, I'm still working on it, and this book is part of the work. My account is subjective and incomplete, and it often goes off in every direction, a bit like me. What I tell here happened.

Some chapters forced me to reopen things I had carefully closed, slowly, one memory at a time. I was hoping to get some meaning out of it, or at least some

peace. Peace, not much. Meaning, a little, and above all the urge to stop keeping quiet.

There are funny pages in this book, and others that are much less so. Quite a bit of absurdity too, because with a brain like mine, life often is. And tenderness, because the people who brought me back are in this story, and without them I probably wouldn't have written it.

The passages about the disorders, the treatments and the hospital stays describe what I went through, in my own words. They are no substitute for medical advice or follow-up care.

I wrote this book, laid it out and self-published it myself. I have nothing against publishers; I wanted to keep control and put my story out as it is, without waiting. The result is homemade, and that will surely show in places. I'd rather that than a clean version I no longer recognize myself in.

I know a manuscript can always be improved, this one like any other. So I'm completely open to suggestions, to editorial collaborations or to professional publication. If you have a proposal, about the text,

the design or the structure, I'll read it with curiosity, and with gratitude.

I was born into a normal family. Which, when I think about it, was the ideal starting point for becoming abnormal. I grew up with a head that never stopped, surrounded by people who didn't always understand me. Most of them stayed anyway.

I wrote this book with the people who don't fit neatly into boxes in mind, the ones who get funny looks and who, more often than not, see wider than the people looking at them. If you're one of them, you know the price. I was made to pay it long enough to know there's no manufacturing defect in there, just people who look wrong.

I have no solution to sell. I have a story, and if you recognize yourself in it at some point, that's already a lot for me.

Make yourself at home. Your labels, you can leave them at the door, next to the boots.

Sébastien Ageorges

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PREAMBLE:

"And what if, in the end, beyond the labels, that's all that was left: a spark dancing in the dark, which we call, without quite knowing why, "ME"?

LOST DAYS, ONE AFTER ANOTHER

My life hasn't been easy to follow, even for me. For a long time I was a riddle to myself, with a pile of ideas, wants, challenges and contradictions that refused to fit in the same box. Today I'm 40, I live in Toronto after twenty years in Montreal, and I feel like looking back to understand by what crooked path I ended up here.

My name is Sébastien. If my life has a common thread, it's that I've always been pulled in opposite directions, often at the same time. I was born in France, in Olivet, a quiet little town in the heart of the Loire Valley, and I spent my first twenty years there with the feeling that the world around me was already too small for everything I wanted to do and every question I was asking myself. Olivet was peaceful, almost asleep. My head never slept.

Because I was born with ADHD, and ADHD is loud and doesn't take orders well. As a kid, my room was

covered in projects started and never finished; it was hard to see the floor. My parents looked at it worried, and sometimes a little impressed all the same. Sleeping and concentrating were out of reach, so doing what was expected of me, forget it. That same restlessness is also where a good part of what I created later came from.

At 20, not very sure of much, I left France and moved to Canada. I was looking for a bigger, freer future. Montreal, with its cruel winters and its bright summers, is where I changed the most, and it's where I found out that my brain couldn't be summed up as ADHD: I was also diagnosed with bipolar I disorder. The euphoric phases and the times I hit rock bottom are part of me today, and they shape the way I see the world; I can't pretend otherwise.

And then there was the other secret, the one a boy my age didn't feel able to face alone: I'm gay. For a long time I wouldn't even say that word inside my own head; I tried to act as if it didn't exist. My taste for art and for everything beautiful was also my way of saying what I couldn't say yet. My coming out[1]

[1] Coming out: telling people openly that you're gay.

came late, and it set me free. Since then I try to be honest, and proud too.

Despite all that (or thanks to all that, I've never really decided), I made a place for myself in the video game industry, a world where you spend your days turning creative mess into worlds that run on a screen. As a technical director, I learned to aim my restlessness at complicated problems. My obsession with details and systems ended up serving the players. Unreal Engine, C++ and 3ds Max became my everyday tools.

I'm writing this autobiography to remember, of course, but mostly to put back in order the pieces lying around all over the place: childhood, passions, falls, successes. And if you feel like walking the road with me, detours and hard moments included, so much the better.

I don't claim to be a role model for anyone. I learned slowly, getting it wrong often, to live with my contradictions, and that's what I'm telling here.

So here it is. Maybe you opened this book out of curiosity, or because you need to recognize yourself somewhere. We start in Olivet, with a baby who wouldn't sleep.



“In the folds of a simple childhood, whole worlds were being invented.”

PART I: ORIGINS

The awakening of the first worlds

I've never known how to sleep. You might think it started in adolescence, or with the medication. No, it was already the case in the crib: a baby who squirms and won't let go of anything, even in the dark. My parents loved me, with their slightly clumsy kind of love, and mostly they were exhausted and worried, not quite knowing what to do with this kid who never switched off.

My oldest memory, though, happens in broad daylight. It has stayed very sharp. I'll tell it with the head I had back then.

I'm three or four. I'm no taller than an ant standing on another ant. I'm on the garage ramp, the cement one that's a bit slippery, with the low wall of white stones all lined up and the little red-brick roof above it. It's my kingdom.

I have a purple ball. A huge one, with an elastic on the end. I throw it, it comes back to my hand. I throw it again, it comes back again. Boing. Boing. I could do this my whole life.

Christophe, my big brother, is seven. To me he's a giant. He comes flying down the slope in his little plastic car, the one with a smiling face and a horn that goes honk. He goes so fast I'm sure one day he'll take off.

And then I ask myself a question. A real one, a serious one: which is stronger, a ball or a car?

I check. I throw my ball at the car. Not to hurt anyone, just to see. The ball goes plop. The car keeps going like nothing happened, and Christophe laughs.

Conclusion: the car is stronger. But the ball is more fun.

We didn't have much money. I didn't realize it, and that's the nicest compliment I can pay my parents. They set their own wants and dreams aside so that afternoons like that one could exist, and we never saw the bill.

My own world stopped at the garden and a few streets around the house. And inside my head, it was crowded. I had friends no one else could see: Michel and his brother René. Another one would come later, in my teens, Andrew. Remember his name; he

comes back in this book, and not always at the right moment.

I talked to them out loud. We went on expeditions, we argued a lot, we remade the world with our own rules, we made up, and I was always the hero, obviously. To be honest, they seemed more real to me than most of the adults I ran into.

The only flesh-and-blood person allowed in there was my sister. She and I played Barbies for hours. The other boys would have found it ridiculous, and we couldn't have cared less; the dolls were mostly there to make up stories that never ended. She was my partner in crime, and the first person who gave me the feeling I could be understood without having to explain myself.

There was already a pebble in my shoe, though. Something I understood very early, without the words to say it, the way children understand things. The love was there; I never doubted it. What happened was a clumsy moment, a truth said out loud by someone who didn't weigh how heavy it was.

I wasn't quite the child they'd been expecting.

I'm sitting at the end of the big kitchen table. It's super heavy, with a beige top that looks like tile. I thought it was real tile, like the floor, but Mom told me no, it's glued on. My chair is woven straw, with the wood all shiny with varnish, and it scratches your bottom. Mom is doing the dishes behind me. I hear the water, the sponge.

All at once, a question drops into my head. I turn around.

"Mom, do you love me?"

She turns off the water. She comes and sits down and takes me on her lap. Good thing I'm not too heavy, even with the two slices of bread and Nutella from this morning. Her voice is soft, but a little cracked, like when you want to cry and you're holding it in.

"When you were in my belly, I was very sad. I wanted a girl..."

A girl? Why a girl?

"...but when you were born, I saw the beautiful little boy you were, and I had no regrets. I loved you and I love you."

I say nothing. My head makes the noise of a spring wound too tight. I look her in the eyes, I give her a kiss on the mouth, and I go up to my room.

That night I can't sleep. I stare at the ceiling and the questions all come at once. Why am I not the girl they wanted? Why do I sometimes feel more like a girl than a boy? Is it to make them happy, or is it just the way it is in my head? And why did they keep me, if they wanted something else? I'm jealous of Céline and Christophe. They were "wanted," Dad says so. What was I? An accident? A mistake?

I feel tiny. An ant that lost its anthill.

So I decide something. I'm going to be the best. Better than everyone. That way they can never regret having me, and they'll love me even more.

That's the night I started wanting to come first everywhere, all the time, and I never really stopped running.

I don't hold it against my parents, really I don't. They're good people, clumsy sometimes, who gave me enormous love and values I still have today.

Honestly, if all parents were like them, the world would be in a lot better shape.

For a long time I carried that memory like a wound. These days I also use it, oddly enough, to get back up when everything around me goes dark.

I've often wondered whether that sentence shaped what came after. Whether the fact that my mother was hoping for a girl had something to do with my sensitivity, with the Barbies, with the way I feel things, and later with the fact that I love men. Genes, what people expect of a child before he's even born, I don't know. I don't have the answer and I'm not even sure there is one. The question, though, was born in that kitchen, next to the table with the fake tile, and it has never really let me go.

I only understood most of this much later. But that's where I start from: a boy who doesn't sleep, who talks to Michel and René, who plays Barbies with his sister, and who has just gotten it into his head that he has to win a race nobody gave him the rules to.

My family

There were five of us at home, and it never felt very solid to me. Christophe, the eldest, carried

everyone's expectations. Céline, the baby, got away with everything. I was in the middle, in a kind of gray zone, and I never quite knew what role I'd been given. Otherwise the house ran like a 1950s manual, with a tradition for every routine.

Sundays in the bakehouse

My father, Claude, didn't talk much. With him, it was gestures. He was a pastry chef, and in the kitchen he had an almost mathematical precision that impressed me a lot and intimidated me a little too.

On Sundays he got up before dawn to make pastries. The smell of butter climbed the stairs to my room and woke me better than any alarm clock. I'd come down half asleep and find him in front of the oven, focused, with a big tray of golden croissants in neat rows. He didn't know how to say "I love you," so he made croissants. Even back then I could feel it was his way of talking to us.

It never lasted long. Once the kitchen was tidied, he went back to being distant. He fixed engines, he looked after the garden. He liked order, and order wasn't really my thing. My too-graceful gestures and my too-high voice bothered him, and so did my

energy, for that matter. I think he didn't know where to file me, so he kept his distance.

Sunday night was pizza night. He pulled them out of the oven one by one, thin crust, tomato sauce and cheese, and we were allowed to eat in front of the TV, plate on our knees. It didn't happen often, so we made the most of it. On those nights we looked like a close family.

My father's father, Didier, was another breed. A big strapping guy who enjoyed life, with a mustache from another era and a voice rasped by cigarettes, and an eye that twinkled all the time. He had enormous, battered hands, hands that had spent their life in metal and engines, and in wood too. He drank and he smoked, and he told dirty jokes while laughing very loud. I wonder now whether there wasn't some sadness hidden under all that, but I have no idea.

I didn't know him long. He left too early, worn out by his excesses. He still left me one afternoon.

I was six. I'd found a golf ball in an empty lot, and to me it was treasure. I'd made myself a putter[2] out of a

[2] A golf or mini-golf club.

long wooden stick and some cardboard taped on any old way. I was so proud of it that I brought it to my grandparents' to show it off.

Didier looked at it. He didn't laugh, and he didn't shrug either. He narrowed his eyes, like in front of a complicated blueprint, then said curtly:

"Come on, kid. Follow me."

He took me into his workshop. Normally children weren't allowed in, and my heart was pounding. It smelled of sawdust and hot iron, with stale tobacco on top. There were tools I didn't know the names of, drawers of nails sorted by size, planks stacked like a giant game of Tetris. Organized chaos, basically.

He laid my putter on the workbench. Without a word, he took a plank, traced the shape of a club head, cut it out with the saw and fixed it to the shaft with two screws tightened hard. Nothing pretty; it was solid and it did the job. That was Didier all over.

I didn't dare speak. He didn't explain anything to me and he didn't congratulate me either. He just did it, that's all, and I watched his hands.

When he handed it to me, my hands were almost shaking. It was heavy; it was a real club. I spent the whole afternoon outside hitting my ball as if I were on a championship green, with my custom-made club, no less. The kid with his cardboard toy didn't exist anymore.

That evening I heard him say to my parents, cigarette in his mouth, between two sips of cheap red:

"That little one... a character. But he'll go far, I'm telling you."

It's the only time I remember hearing him talk about me.

He died a few years later, and I never got to thank him. Even today, when I hold a tool or tinker with something, I think of him, of his precise movements, of the silence between us in the workshop, of the plank and the two screws.

MARTINE

My mother, Martine, held the house together at arm's length, without making a sound. She checked that nothing was missing and everything was in its place, even if it meant forgetting herself in the

routine. She loved us with a total, almost smothering love. And even as a small boy, I could feel she might break, and it unsettled me.

It was as I grew up that I understood all that attention was also a way of running away. She came from a house ruled by her father, my grandfather Pierre. Even his name sounded hard. His actions were worse.

Pierre could darken a room just by walking into it. One summer, I was eight, we were at his place in Brittany, in an old manor he'd won gambling. A cold house, with ceilings too high. One evening my grandmother Monique let dinner burn. Pierre stood up without a word, his face shut tight. And he started throwing the plates, one by one. They exploded against the walls, they bounced off the tiles. Monique was crying without a sound and trying to dodge them as best she could. I was in a corner, in tears, and my legs were shaking so much I couldn't move.

I never forgot that scene.

My mother had grown up in that. And yet she'd managed to build something else for us. It didn't

stop her from sinking, at times, into depressions I didn't understand.

As a teenager I was cruel to her. I hurt her with words, with my rages, and I made her cry. She'd wipe her eyes without saying anything. I knew perfectly well it stayed with her, even if I didn't want to admit it.

Why so much anger? My parents stood for everything I refused to become. I found their view of the world narrow, stuck in absurd ideas: foreigners, homosexuals, anything outside the mold was abnormal to them. And I already knew I didn't fit in the mold. I wasn't the son they dreamed of.

They've changed since. Slowly, without ever making a big declaration of it, they let those ideas go. Watching them change gave me a lot of hope, more than I would have thought. I still don't know if I'm the one who moved them or if it was just life.

Christophe, the silent riddle of the older brother

Christophe is four years older than me. When we were kids, he was there without really being there.

He preferred the company of our cousins, and something pulled him out of the house; I never knew what.

I can still see him riding off on his bike toward their place, back straight, eyes fixed on the end of the road, while I stayed sitting on the front step. He'd come home late, cheeks red from the wind, with his head full of stories he never told. I would have loved to get into his world, but I didn't dare.

Much later, one night, in the middle of a long conversation with plenty of silences, he admitted he'd been jealous of me for a long time. Of my grades, which I seemed to get without effort while he slaved away. And of my wins in competition, all those podiums I climbed with an ease he found almost insolent. To him I was the lucky kid, the quarterback from the American movies, the one parents look at with pride.

I hadn't seen any of it. I was too busy with the mess in my own head to notice that he was doing badly. When I think back, his absences and his eyes sliding away were pretty clear, actually. But I was a child, and I didn't look much further than myself.

We grew closer toward the end of my twenties, as thirty came into view. There was no click; it happened little by little. I think the birth of his daughter, Cléo, changed everything. With her smile and her sparkling eyes, she suddenly gave us something to share.

I remember a winter evening, there was snow on the roofs. Christophe had come to pick me up at the airport in Paris. In the car, sitting side by side, the silence wasn't awkward anymore. He talked to me about Cléo, about her first steps and the first words she was trying to say, about what it did to him to watch her grow. I didn't know he had that voice, a softer one, and all of a sudden I felt very close to him.

Since then it's become our ritual. Every time I come back to France, he's the one waiting at arrivals. He raises his hand, he smiles a little. It looks like nothing, and I care about it enormously.

I can see now that we had each other wrong. He saw a rival in me, when all I wanted was for us to recognize each other. We were stuck in roles we hadn't chosen, in family stories bigger than us.

It's calm now, and Cléo has a lot to do with that. When I'm in France, I sometimes look after her. I watch her play without a care in the world, and I tell myself that this old rivalry, at least, she won't inherit.

With Christophe, it took time. I had to stop wanting to be right and try to understand.

Every time I walk through the arrivals hall, I look for his face in the crowd, and his raised hand.

Céline, or absolute complicity

And then there's Céline, whom I've never called anything but Jojotte, because she liked it. Nobody knows where the nickname comes from, and it suits her perfectly. She's three years younger than me, and the gap never mattered between us. She was already my refuge when we were little, and I was a bit hers. She's my confidante and my best friend, the person I can tell everything to, even the things that aren't said.

As kids we were inseparable. At school I played bodyguard the moment anyone bothered her, even though she didn't really need me: her comebacks came faster than my fists. After class it was almost a ritual. We'd slip out of the house and run to the

corner supermarket with our savings counted to the cent. Candy, ice cream, it all went. We ate it laughing, very proud of our little act of disobedience, and for as long as a bag of candy lasted nothing else mattered.

It's as adults that we really found each other. One late evening, glass of wine in hand, lights low, we finally dared. She told me she loved women. And I, almost at the same moment, told her I loved men. We burst out laughing, a nervous laugh, we couldn't believe it, and mostly we were relieved. We'd grown up side by side each hiding the same thing. After that night I saw our whole childhood differently, and we grew even closer.

But the night that best says what she means to me, and what I was willing to do for her, is another one, older.

One Sunday I come home from a competition, wiped out. It's one in the morning. I open my bedroom door, legs heavy, eyelids drooping. On my bed there's a worksheet with a little note scribbled in a hurry: "I don't understand any of it, can you help

me, please? It's for tomorrow." Signed Jojotte, obviously.

My head was dropping onto the nightstand. I sat down anyway and picked up a pen, because it was her, and for her I always said yes. I did the exercises one by one, with Andrew's help, the numbers dancing in front of my tired eyes. At three in the morning it was done. All she had to do was copy it out neatly and go off to school with her homework finished.

Sometimes a smell or the silence of a night takes me back to that evening. I never asked her for anything in return. The next day she was smiling, and that was more than enough for me.

She's still my refuge. With her, things weigh less, even the secrets that would have crushed me if I'd had to carry them alone. There's a bit of her in most of the memories I tell here.



“When they told me to calm down, I turned up the volume.”

PART II: TOO MUCH, NOT ENOUGH, NEVER LIKE THE OTHERS

Two brains in one skin

Inside my head, two things don't go together. The first is attention: it never stays where I put it. The second is thought: it goes too far, for too long, and it doesn't stop when I'm tired.

ADHD is first of all this: I reread the same sentence five times and it won't go in. Someone talks to me, I nod, and I haven't retained a thing. A buzzing fluorescent light, a coworker breathing loudly next to me, a memory floating up on its own, and my attention is already somewhere else.

Giftedness is the other half: I think too much. I replay conversations, what I said and what I should have said. I see what's going to go wrong in a plan before everyone else, which makes me useful at work and a pain in meetings. And I get bored very fast: I understand in two minutes, and for the rest I wait for the others to catch up.

The two together get in each other's way. ADHD makes me start ten things, giftedness wants each one

to be perfect, and I end up restless and anxious at the same time. It's tiring.

And it doesn't stay in my head. It spills over onto everything else: the keys, the meals, the conversations, the nights.

Further on, I'll describe highs and crashes, very lucid moments and quite a few skids. Redefining these labels, the specialists do that better than me. I just want to tell what it's like, day to day, to live with two brains in one skin.

A fall morning, leaves all over the sidewalk and that smell of earth and wet wood. I'm at my front door, digging through one pocket, then the other. No keys. I feel my cheeks go red, and not so much because I've lost them. It's the little voice telling me they might be in the fridge. Again.

It makes for days like this one. I go to the kitchen for a glass of water, I see the trash is full, I take it down, I run into a neighbor, I come back up, and I find myself in the living room holding a cable, with no memory of the glass of water. Out loud, it happens too: I lose the thread of my own sentence halfway

through, and I say "anyway" with a laugh, because it's simpler than explaining.

I'm also very clumsy. I knock over glasses, I bump into furniture, into door frames, into the hallway walls, because my head is already three steps ahead of my body. I fall, too: on the stairs, on the sidewalk, sometimes over nothing at all. I often have bruises I can no longer account for.

In second grade[3], in 1993, I was sent to a psychologist because I was too disruptive, too fidgety. "He's got ants in his pants," the teachers said, laughing. They didn't know that phrase would stick to me for years.

The psychologist gave me the WISC-III[4]. To me it was a game. Shapes, number codes to crack, I gobbled them up like candy, and for once I was good at something. Result: 132. My parents had come in with an unmanageable child and they left with a

[3] Second grade (CE1 in France): the second year of elementary school, around age seven.
[4] WISC-III: Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, third edition. The standard IQ test for children.

diagnosis of giftedness, which didn't mean much to them.

Back then, in France, psychologists didn't talk about ADHD. My parents were advised to sign me up for a sports club. My mother, who distrusted conventional medicine, gave me Euphytose[5], little sugary tablets that looked like Smarties. Some days I'd swallow twenty at once hoping it would calm the volcano. Spoiler: it did nothing.

All through school, I mostly tried to hang on. I improvised each day and fought against a framework I didn't understand. I saw things differently, and I was blamed for not walking a straight line.

The word that stuck, ADHD, I heard it as an adult, years after crossing the Atlantic.

In Montreal, I went to the ADHD Clinic. There, behavioral therapists, psychologists and psychiatrists work together. They questioned the people close to me and they went through my symptoms, my routines and my slip-ups, and nobody judged me. They

[5] A herbal remedy sold in France for mild stress.

concluded it was ADHD, with borderline personality traits[6].

For the first time, I had words for it. My brain worked differently, that's all; it was no whim and no character flaw. I was relieved, enormously. I could finally get treatment and tools, and fit my life around them.

I was prescribed Vyvanse, a little blue and white capsule. It cures nothing, of course. I don't take it every day because it sometimes makes me anxious, but often it makes me very focused, almost superhuman. My right leg still shakes. On the other hand, I can follow a conversation without interrupting, and finish a task without starting ten others.

I'm still a mess. I still get lost in my thoughts. The difference is that now I finish what I start more often.

Out of step with myself

My attention doesn't work halfway: either it scatters in every direction, or it locks onto a single thing. I

[6] Borderline personality disorder: marked instability in emotions, relationships and self-image.

almost never get the middle. In the morning, when I wake up, I don't know which of the two versions of me is going to get out of bed. It's always been like this, so to me it's normal.

When attention wanders

When my attention wanders, anything can pull me away. A smell, a word heard on the radio, a notification, and I've left what I was doing without noticing.

One morning, I put water on to boil for an egg and start the timer. I go to the bedroom to get my phone and check the time, I see the clothes on the chair, I put them away, then I notice the window is dirty. Half an hour later, a burning smell brings me back to the kitchen. The water has boiled away and the pot is ruined.

I don't forget for lack of interest. I've moved on to something else before finishing the first thing, and the first thing no longer exists in my head. At night, I take stock and it doesn't add up to anything: lots of things started, very few finished.

When I lock in: hyperfocus[7]

[7] Intense concentration, to the point of forgetting everything else.

The opposite happens too, without warning. When I tip into hyperfocus, I see nothing else. I don't hear people calling me. I don't notice the time going by. I'm neither hungry nor thirsty, and I only realize it when my head starts spinning.

One Saturday, I start looking into why a shadow flickers in a program I'm working on. I sit down at ten in the morning. When I look up, it's nine at night, my throat is dry, I've had nothing to eat or drink all day, and my phone shows messages left unanswered.

It's not that I'm having fun: I simply can't stop. The next day my back hurts and I don't remember half the day. In those moments I'm very productive, and I miss everything else: a meal, an appointment, an important message.

First steps into a world of logic

I was eight when I discovered BASIC on Christophe's computer. GOTO, IF, THEN, PRINT: with those few words, the black screen did what I told it. I took refuge there whenever I could. One night, after hours of trying, I managed to make shooting stars appear, really just dots and lines

lighting up and going out, nothing more. I was exhausted and prouder than ever, with the blue light of the screen moving across the walls of my brother's room.

At twelve, I moved on to C. Every compile that worked was a small victory over the boredom eating away at my days. I played around in DOS, with its bare-bones interface, and I made little programs and tools, puzzles too. I was learning to tame the machine. The nights flew by without my noticing, and in the morning I showed up at school with dark circles and a head full of ideas.

Giftedness

On top of ADHD, I have what's called giftedness, a high IQ. On paper, it sounds enviable. In real life, it mostly means I think a lot, all the time, and I don't know how to stop. With no one to help me use it, I mainly learned to go around in circles inside my head.

When I have a problem, even a small one, I first look at everything that could go wrong. I spot the flaws before the others, and I say so, which isn't always appreciated. After a conversation, I replay it: what I

said, what the other person answered, what I should have said. Sometimes for days.

I also look for the reason behind everything. Why that person used that word, why that project failed, why I react this way. Often it leads nowhere, and I keep going anyway.

The flip side is overload. I see connections everywhere, even where others see a straight line. At sixteen, I threw myself into JavaScript and into 2D and 3D software, with interfaces that scared everyone and that I found obvious. I could spend hours on an animation or a render without eating or sleeping, and my emails went unanswered. And as soon as I'd understood how something worked, it bored me and I dropped it.

A world too big for my mind

With giftedness, every door opens at once. An ordinary conversation can end up on quantum physics or on dissecting human behavior. One evening, at a dinner, I compliment a painting on the wall. Ten minutes later I'm on to the art movements of the twentieth century, then the psychological effect of color in abstract art. I can clearly see the person

across from me checked out long ago, and I can't stop. The ideas come one after another and I follow them.

And then there's everyday life, where I trip over my own feet. Chores are too ordinary for my attention to grab onto. I once forgot to do laundry for three weeks because I was caught up in an idea (I don't remember which one, obviously).

Improvising

They say improvising is making do with what you've got. For me it became a way of surviving. Even as a little kid, I worked around the unexpected, and instruction manuals, I reinvented them instead of following them.

One day I have to get dressed in a hurry for an important meeting. Shower done, bag ready, shirt on, all that's missing is the shoes. Except it rained and not one pair is dry. So I get out the hair dryer, one in each shoe, and I stand there barefoot, balancing on my heels, coffee in hand, staring into space. It was grotesque, and it was so me.

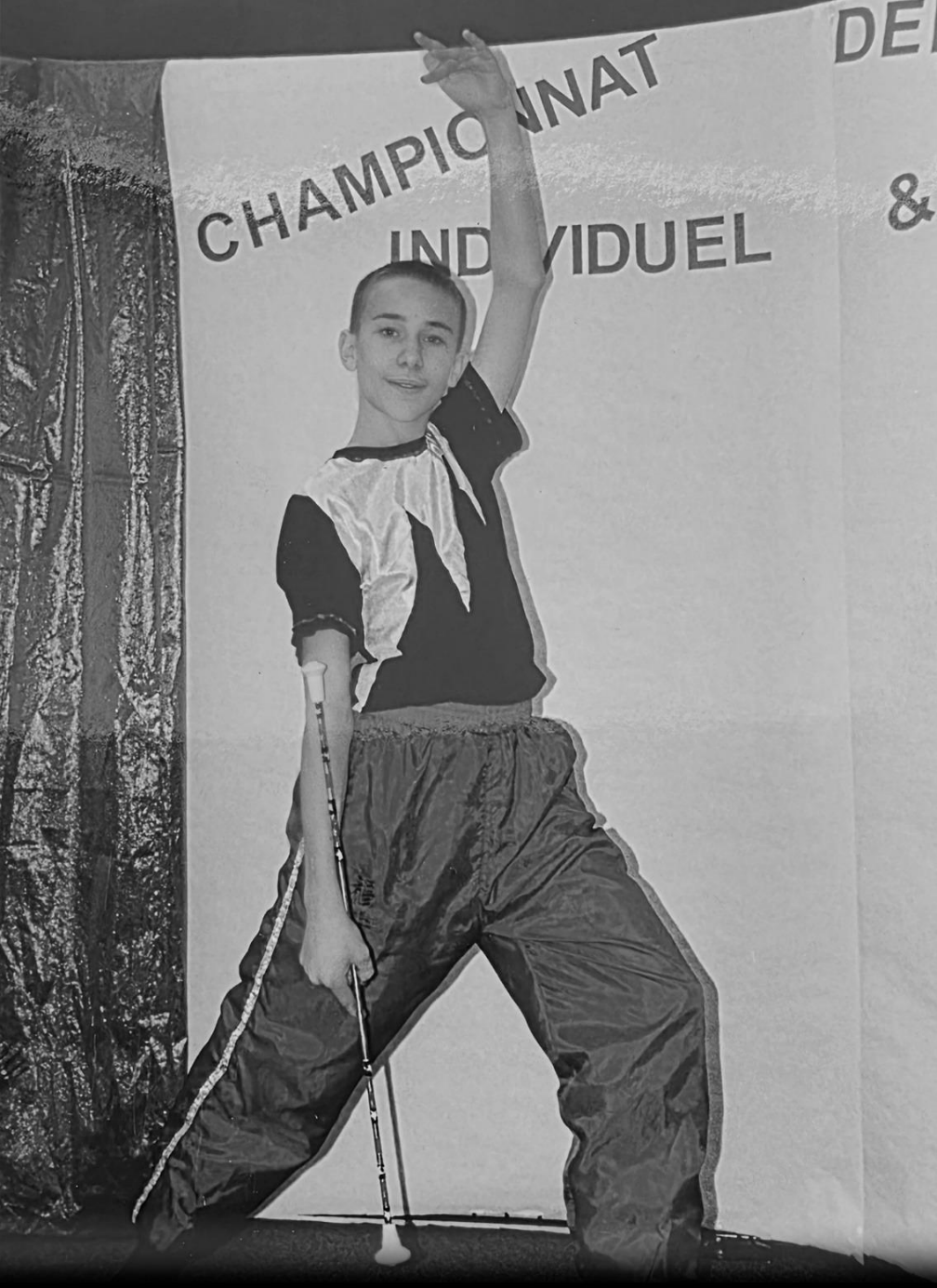
Told like that, it sounds like a comedy sketch. For me it was a Tuesday like any other. My life is full of absurd scenes and strange detours, with very lucid moments wedged between two blanks, and I juggle with what's left when the momentum has dropped or when I went too fast and everything went with it.

Planning, I can't do. But when everything goes sideways, I'm formidable, and that's mostly practice: years of dealing with my own mess taught me to react fast when it all falls apart. My brain runs on urgency and novelty, on danger too, on anything that moves, really.

And sometimes, it's exhilarating. In those moments I'm completely present, and that, I wouldn't trade for anything.

I've never been able to settle for a single path. The distracted child became an adult who improvises. People call me unstable; I keep moving anyway, bumps included. I think too much and I feel too much, I linger on details that others brush aside.

What I learned in all this is to connect pieces that don't look like they go together, and to put some order back into my disorder.



**“Twirling: spin, fall,
start again. Like my life.”**

PART III: TEENAGE DETONATION

ADOLESCENCE

Middle school[8] was gray walls and days that were all the same. And for me, a permanent clash between my chattering head, my disorganized hands, and a school system that wanted everything neatly put away. In the hallways with their tired linoleum you heard the students' footsteps, bursts of laughter, and the monitors shouting over it all. It smelled of chalk and cafeteria, lukewarm soup and reheated meat, a smell that sometimes turned my stomach.

That's where everything fell apart. The demands kept rising and nobody understood any better than before what was going on with me. My teachers were fed up with my papers, with flashes of brilliance in the middle of sentences never finished. To them I was a distracted, messy teenager, beyond saving. I forgot my homework. It wasn't even laziness: it vanished into the chaos of my room, under crumpled notebooks and computer cables, next to the mugs of

[8] In France, "collège" covers the first four years of secondary school, from about age 11 to 15. Roughly grades 6 to 9. Nothing to do with college.

cold tea. When I managed to hand it in, it was three days late with clumsy excuses nobody believed.

At home it was no better. The fights broke out all at once, loud, and afterward a heavy silence was left behind. "Why can't you just make an effort?" my mother would ask, irritated, almost desperate. My father sighed and looked away. I didn't know how to explain to them that willpower had nothing to do with it. Every assignment was a mountain, and even when I sincerely wanted to succeed, I never made it to the top.

A REFUGE IN ESCAPE

At thirteen, tired of never being understood, I fell back on what gave me a little control: my passions. Video games had clear rules and they rewarded effort right away. In there I was a hero, I could become a master, and nobody judged me. Sports became a release valve too. Running, kicking a ball, feeling my body move, it turned down the racket in my head. These refuges came at a price, though.

First, isolation, which settled in without a sound. The mockery, which already existed in elementary school, doubled in middle school. They made fun of

my messiness and my mismatched clothes, my awkwardness with other people, and that effeminate side I couldn't manage to hide. The invisible rules that governed relationships between my classmates escaped me completely. They must have handed out an instruction manual at birth, and I was absent that day.

Failure and rebellion

At fourteen, I was failing school. My grades did the splits: 18 out of 20 in math, where the equations came on their own, like breathing, and 2 out of 20 in languages, where I lost to every irregular verb. The teachers saw nothing but the problem anymore, and I no longer respected any authority. The suspensions piled up, each incident adding another layer. And then I was told I was repeating the year[9].

I was humiliated, and a little relieved too, because I barely knew the kids in my class and I wasn't going to miss them. I remember a strange feeling of emptiness walking out of the room where they'd told me the decision. I felt nothing in particular; I was

[9] Repeating a year: doing the same school year over again. Common in France, far rarer in North America.

resigned, coldly. I had failed, yes, and it didn't surprise me one bit.

Wasted potential, but not extinguished

At that point, you could have called me a waste: a gifted kid doing the bare minimum and walking into exams with his hands in his pockets, counting on improvisation. Part of me still refused to go out completely.

I didn't understand. I didn't understand how I could be so intelligent and feel so stupid at the same time.

I grasped concepts without even learning them, and I couldn't get through a single assignment.

I wanted to succeed, I even dreamed of it. But every time I promised myself I'd get down to it, something slipped away. My attention melted, my mind drifted off at the first instruction, and I was left stuck there with my teachers' anger and my shame at not living up to what I was supposedly able to do.

I was waiting for an adult to see me, to stop for two seconds and say, "I understand you." It never

happened. There was no mentor, no teacher who paid attention.

I grew without a stake, a little crooked.

That silence from the grown-ups, I still remember it. Being invisible to them hurt more than the mockery.

I held on anyway, out of pride or stubbornness. I told myself: "If they can't see who I am, I'll become someone they can't ignore." I dragged that promise around with me for a long time, and for years it kept my head above water.

There was still math and physics. There, everything made sense, with a logic that didn't move, while the rest of my life went off in every direction.

The system seemed to have written me off. Me, I was fourteen, with 18 out of 20 in math and a year to do over.

When lavender brings souls together

In middle school I was alone, or nearly. The others had quickly found nicknames for my difference, "fairy," "faggot," slapped on my back like a dirty sticker on a schoolbag. I isolated myself, eventually,

without really choosing to. Few people dared sit next to me. There was still a small group of girls who hadn't gone along with the law of the strongest, childhood friends met on the benches of kindergarten who had kept a place for me with them. Among them, Mélanie, the one who wrote the foreword to this book.

Mélanie was calm itself. She spoke softly, with measured gestures, and her gaze was always a little elsewhere. She would never have crossed against a red light, and yet she had a slightly rebellious side, barely visible: a mocking smile she held back, eyes rolled to the ceiling when a teacher was unfair. She read a lot. Maybe she wrote in secret; in any case she never told anyone. She spoke low and thought loud. You could confide anything to her; it never left her.

We were in eighth grade[10], and my head was already full of absurd questions that seemed hugely important to me. One day, one of them obsesses me: how did humanity figure out that smoking tobacco or cannabis did something, when the grass in the

[10] "Quatrième" is the second-to-last year of collège, around age 13 or 14. Roughly eighth grade.

garden didn't? Had they tried everything, leaf by leaf? I mention it to my friends and, without much resistance on their part, I rope them into an afternoon of experimentation.

That day, the sky was pale blue. We'd arranged to meet at the Parc du Poutyl, the old park in Olivet we knew by heart, with its hundred-year-old oaks with gnarled branches and its lawns worn out by summers, the badly kept artificial grotto, and the little open-air theater, always deserted on weekdays.

We set up right next to it, on a floating wooden platform at the edge of the river, a little out of the way so no one would see us. We had a bag full of dried leaves: bay, lavender, rosemary, thyme, and even corn silk found who knows where. We rolled them as best we could in stolen rolling papers, and we lit our first "herbalist's cigarettes."

The lavender, we still remember it. When you breathed in, it made a puff of mint that cleaned out your lungs. And then on the exhale, a moldy aftertaste jumped to your throat, a mushroom bitterness, unbearable. We looked at each other, disgusted, and

burst out laughing, a real fit of giggles, the kind that doubles you over on a dock.

That afternoon, we discovered nothing useful for humanity. Mostly we did something a little dumb together, among people who knew they were different and weren't that bothered by it.

With Mélanie, that's the day we became partners in crime. We were best friends for a while, then just friends, and then we lost touch and found each other again several times, to the point that I couldn't say how many.

Much later, each of us with a good many more bumps, we crossed paths again. By chance, I think. Between us there had always been those long silences, and it picked up again every time anyway.

This time there was no lavender left to roll. We were two adults face to face, a little banged up, with fine lines at the corners of our eyes. We talked about the things you usually keep to yourself, about our labels and about what had cracked along the way. We laid out our diagnoses the way you lay your cards on the table in a game of tarot, and without saying it, we understood we spoke the same language.

Seen from a distance, our lives didn't have much in common, and yet we had the same hollows. Dreams a little off-kilter, fears we'd never told anyone, that way of loving too hard or collapsing without warning. We recognized each other, and it showed in the way we looked at one another.

We laughed from the heart, the way you do when you haven't had a break in a long time, and we talked for a long while. And then yes, we cried. A little.

High school and the escape into smoke

When I got to high school[11], I discovered cannabis. My parents were surely hoping I'd discover something else. And I liked it right away. That thick, acrid smoke did me good, strangely, a bit as if someone had turned the volume of my thoughts down a notch. At breaks, I'd go off with a group of friends to smoke a joint behind the gym or in a quiet corner of the park next to the school. It had become our little ritual. Time slowed down, and everything got softer for a while.

[11] In France, "lycée" covers the last three years of secondary school, from about 15 to 18. It ends with the baccalauréat.

This self-medication had its dangers. One Wednesday morning, I'd smoked more than usual and eaten several space cakes[12]. An hour later I was in class and everything started to twist around me: the walls were melting, my classmates' faces ran like paint in the rain, and there were toothbrushes everywhere, on the walls, on the floor, even on the blackboard (toothbrushes, I never understood why). How I got home that day, I have no idea. I woke up the next morning with a heavy head and muddled thoughts, and I was ashamed for days.

SELF-MEDICATION OR DESTRUCTION?

It often starts with a simple gesture, a joint you light to get to sleep, or a drink you pour yourself in the evening to unwind (with a pill, it's the same). At the start, nobody talks about dependence. I saw it as a strategy, little discreet adjustments to repair what the world was damaging in me without even noticing.

Very quickly, I learned to dose my days: one puff to sleep, two to calm down, and I don't know how many to put up with classes and teachers. Cannabis

[12] Cakes baked with cannabis.

was my sleeping pill and my anti-anxiety med, except nobody had prescribed them. I thought I'd found the right setting. I was treating myself, without a prescription.

It didn't last. The body doesn't let itself be fooled for long, and the mind even less. Little by little, I wasn't smoking to treat myself anymore, I was smoking out of reflex, and I no longer quite knew whether it was to feel better or just to not feel worse.

Then came the excess. I smoked from the moment I woke up, before even drinking a glass of water, and some days I didn't function at all anymore unless my eyes were half closed and my head was wrapped in cotton. I missed appointments and I lied to the people close to me. And I spent absurd amounts of money buying what kept me from collapsing, or what sped up the fall, I still don't really know which.

The worst part is that I could see perfectly well that I was sinking. I just didn't know how to climb back up. Cannabis kept me from feeling things, but it no longer protected me from much. I remember one evening, in my room, curtains drawn and lights off, a joint in my hand, with tears running down for no

reason. At that stage it wasn't soothing me anymore; it was numbing me.

And then there was that night.

I was alone in my room, after a whole day of being high without a break. Ten joints, maybe more; I'd stopped counting. I was slumped in the old armchair, my muscles weren't responding anymore, and my eyes were open with nobody behind them. The moon drew sharp shadows on the wall and those shadows looked more alive than I did.

That night, I thought about dying. I didn't tell anyone. That thought came back other times, later.

Over the years I tried other substances, soft and hard, sometimes in secret and sometimes with a kind of pride. Cigarettes, alcohol, cocaine, MDMA, mushrooms, ketamine. I had become a lucid addict, a brain too aware, that knew exactly which hole it was sliding into and convinced itself every time that maybe it would finally find peace down there. At the start, it was just that something hurt somewhere, and I was trying to put a bandage where no doctor knew what to do.

And then, now and again, it stopped dead.

I remember specific days when something clicked in my head: "OK. Enough of this crap." No transition. I'd get up and throw out everything I had, the weed and the alcohol, right down to the Saturday-night pills. A big, almost military cleanup, with me in the role of the general barking orders at a nervous system in complete disarray.

Withdrawal, though, didn't take orders. The following days were night sweats, nausea, hellish insomnia and anxiety right down to my molars. Sometimes even small hallucinations, like those voices I thought I'd left behind at the hospital. My heart beat too fast, for no reason. I was hungry and the idea of eating made me want to throw up. I held on anyway. And every time, I repeated to myself: "Never again am I touching that shit."

I believed it with everything I had. It was a promise carved as deep as the evening my mother told me she'd been hoping for a girl.

Except all it took was one piece of bad news or one evening too alone for it to give way. Sometimes even a success that rang hollow. And I'd dive back in as if

nothing had happened. Yesterday's promise went out the window, like all my other promises.

You could say I was weak. I experienced it more as a war against myself, with people around me who didn't see that, sometimes, the drugs weren't helping me run from anything. They were there to shut my head up when I couldn't manage it any other way.

And with every relapse there was that same click, that moment when I set off again, like an unpredictable old buddy whispering to me: "Come on, Seb. Let's go again. We'll improvise. Like always." My life has often worked like that, in stalls and restarts, and I kept moving forward with it.

Today I think back on it without being too hard on myself. At the time, it was my way of getting by with what I had on hand. Clumsy and dangerous, fine.

I don't think I'm the only one who looked for a buffer zone between the noise of the world and what was going on in my head. Mine smelled of joints and cold cigarettes, with a pill on top now and then.

SPORTS

For a long time, sports had a place apart in my life, which was already pretty hectic. It was a refuge, and it was also where I put my biggest ambitions. When I think back, I see enormous joys and quite a few frustrations. And a few victories nobody would have predicted, me first of all.

It all started at ten, in a charmless gymnastics hall in the town where I grew up. It smelled of chalk and effort, and the coach gave his orders in a dry tone, always the same. For a kid like me, going off in every direction, gymnastics with its strict rules was a real challenge. I strung together approximate moves and botched landings, with the remarks of a coach who, I'm still convinced, mostly saw a troublemaker in me. Those two years were hard. I still came out of them with a discipline of the body that would serve me in a passion I hadn't seen coming.

The click came on an ordinary day, during a trip to the frozen-food store. My parents were lingering in the icy aisles, and I went outside. Right across the street, something unreal was happening: bodies twirling, dance and acrobatics perfectly synchronized, and athletes spinning a metal baton with

rubber tips, drawing arcs in the air. Baton twirling[13], as I would learn it was called. It was going to become the center of my world.

In June 1998, one evening when the air already smelled of summer, I found myself almost by chance in a theater for a small gala, put on by a local club I didn't know existed. The curtain opened and the dancers went from cabaret to modern jazz, contemporary and classical in a choreography that glued me to my seat. Then came the baton carriers and the gymnasts, juggling in the air with figures that vanished almost as soon as they were drawn. I fell in love with that sport, that night, rather foolishly.

At twelve, I signed up at the club. I was scared, but the urge to learn was stronger. Six hours of training a week at the club, and at home I'd stopped counting. Every toss, every pirouette, was a small challenge against myself. That first year, I passed two of the discipline's five levels. There were obstacles all the same.

Being the only boy in an almost entirely female world came at a price. The mocking looks and the

[13] Baton twirling: a sport that mixes gymnastics and dance, with a metal baton that is spun, tossed and caught to music.

remarks whispered in the locker rooms were the background noise. I kept going anyway, because I wanted it too much. The first year was a battlefield. It calmed down after that, and the third year changed everything.

By then I was training ten hours a week at the club, and far more than that alone in my room. In the evenings, it was my own ritual, baton in hand and music in my ears, and the four walls of my room became a stage. Sometimes a missed toss sent the baton crashing to the floor with a racket that woke the whole house. My father, at the end of his rope, would shout my name. It went a little over my head, I have to admit.

The club noticed I spent my life there and pushed me to take a course to become a coach and choreographer. I learned each movement already thinking about what I could do with it. I no longer just wanted to execute figures; I wanted to create, to tell stories with the body, to get across what I couldn't say with words.

Then came the end of that season, and the competitions, with the adrenaline and the stress rising. I can

see the judges in a row and the silent audience. The music starts, I launch in, I put everything into every figure. When the results came down, I heard the word "champion" and at first I thought it wasn't for me. French champion. All those evenings spent rehearsing alone, without enough sleep, had just been good for something.

Twirling had become my way of existing, the place where I managed to say things without speaking. And the title, I'd won it with a baton that had spent the year banging on my bedroom floor.

THE CALL OF THE SUMMITS

After those first successes, my club felt too small to me, even though I felt at home there. The urge came slowly, then became very clear: go higher, find a place where I could keep improving and try other things. I heard about another federation, another club. And, as luck would have it, it wasn't far from home.

I remember the day I walked through the door for the first time, heart pounding. The hall was full of the noise of batons spinning with almost military precision, and an impressive coach was giving very

clear instructions. Among the students was her brother, a boy my age, who'd come with their little brother. He was the one who would become my rival, and I have to say he reflected quite a few of my own flaws back at me. They intimidated me a little, the two brothers. At the same time, it reassured me, because for the first time I wasn't the only boy. Here, nobody looked at us as intruders.

This club aimed for excellence and I quickly felt that expectations were high. Every practice had the feel of an exam. I thought I had the discipline down. In fact I still had a lot to learn, from raw power to the most delicate gestures, and about everything to do with artistic expression. I soaked up the advice and made every movement my own. And along the way, almost by surprise, I started to create.

Writing choreographies quickly became an obsession, a way to put a little order into everything that had always been boiling inside me. Inspiration came from anywhere. A curtain rippling in a draft, a scene from a movie, or the odd cut of a piece of clothing glimpsed in the street, anything. My brain, always on alert, picked up these little scraps and turned them into movements, and my notebooks filled up at top

speed with notes scribbled every which way. It was a bit of a bubble of my own, in a club where competition sometimes turned into a not very healthy rivalry.

Because it wasn't all rosy. My rival, the coach's brother, carried an enormous weight: he was the model student, and on top of that the son of the club president. Every time I improved, I felt like I was casting a shadow over him. He'd look away, there were silences full of insinuations, a muted jealousy I could feel without him ever saying anything. I'd come looking for high standards in a good atmosphere, and I found myself in one that was more and more suffocating.

In 2003, I went back to my old club. It was a relief, and at the same time it hurt to leave, because I'd learned an enormous amount there. But my first club was simpler, and my original coach had always been kind to me. There, I didn't have to carry other people's expectations and rivalries.

So I packed up my things and went back.

The return, and farewell to the stage

Going back to my original club was a bit like coming home to a house you left long ago. It still smelled of rosin and waxed wood, and I recognized everything, every corner where I'd spent hours. But what really counted was finding my coach again. She'd always had that reassuring way about her, a kindness that didn't waver, whether I was full of ambition or full of doubt. With her, I had the feeling everything was possible again.

In 2004, I had only one goal in mind: to outdo myself. I trained almost obsessively, harder than ever. And I took risks bordering on recklessness, no-handed cartwheels, layout front flips with split legs, triple gymnastic tosses. On competition day, I danced as if the whole world was watching me, to a song by Nightwish[14], my favorite band. The scores came in, from 9.2 to 9.8 out of 10. I felt as if everything I'd set aside to get there had just been paid back all at once.

[14] A Finnish symphonic metal band.

I was French champion again. For a moment, the pieces of my life seemed to hold together. The effort and the nights rehearsing in the silence of my room, even the criticism I'd taken, all of it made sense. I didn't know it yet, but it was also the beginning of the end.

The following year, I moved from the stage to the wings, to direct others. Becoming a coach and choreographer made me proud, with a strange melancholy underneath that I couldn't quite explain. I organized galas and wrote choreographies. I also ran workshops in other clubs, to pass on what I'd learned. Now it was my students tossing the baton to my choreographies, and I watched them from the edge of the hall.



“I was an adult. But where was the instruction manual?”

PART IV: REBIRTH

New world, new me

And then 2006 came, a half-and-half year. I still cared about twirling, which had given me so much, but I thought more and more about Canada, its wide-open spaces and the idea of starting from scratch over there. It took up almost all my thoughts. I was still training, but less hard, a bit like when you play the last levels of a game already knowing you'll finish it soon.

Twirling had been my discipline and my way out. It had let me exist where nobody understood me, and shine without having to talk. Except something was shifting in me, quietly. I was leaving behind the stage and the applause, and the baton thrown toward the ceiling. I was twenty and already had a lot of memories for my age. I don't think I was running from anything. I wanted to start over somewhere else, and I was ready to go.

The day I put my baton away for the last time, there was no ceremony. I was alone in my room, I put it away, and I understood that chapter was ending. Leaving for Canada was going to open another life,

and over there twirling would be nothing but a memory, even if it's a memory that has stayed very much alive.

Today, when I think back on those years, it makes me a little wistful, and grateful too. Twirling taught me to push past myself, and to keep going even on days when nothing worked. My life went in another direction after that. But when I think about it, what I mostly see is my room in the evening, music in my ears, the baton hitting the floor and my father shouting my name.

THE ILLUSION OF SUCCESS

My mother kept telling me: "Where there's a will, there's a way!" It's the kind of thing you say to children. Stubborn kid that I was, I took it literally and filed it away in a corner of my head, and it never really left. I used it a bit like a cheat code to open the doors of the impossible.

One day, I was eight, I came across a documentary on TV, on the old wood-framed tube set that held pride of place in the living room. It was about polar bears. I sat nailed to the couch watching their heavy walk across the ice. They were immense and they

looked so alone. There was a kind of calm in their eyes, with something broken behind it, and it shook me, I don't quite know why.

I should say that by then my room already looked like a miniature ice floe. There were dozens of stuffed polar bears, picture books, and on the wall a giant poster of a bear sitting and gazing at the frozen horizon. I adored them. They were my confidants, with the advantage that they never repeated anything to anyone.

In the documentary, a deep voice explained that you could come across these animals... in Canada. And there, bam. In my head it was settled: one day I would live in Canada. With the polar bears. It was decided.

I announced it to my parents, obviously, with all the solemnity of a child's oath. They smiled, vaguely touched, the way you smile at a kid who swears he's going to marry his schoolteacher or become a vegetarian astronaut. They didn't take me seriously, and I took that as one more challenge.

Time passed. The years knocked my dreams around, and the adults tried to put them away in more

reasonable drawers. And there I was at nineteen, lost in the middle of my school failure. I'd repeated a year a second time in 2004, the very year I became French champion again. For the future, I had almost no bearings at all. Except that old childhood dream, still lying around in a corner and not dead.

So I made a decision. With or without the baccalauréat[15], whether school thought I was any good or not, I would leave, no matter what. I looked my parents straight in the eye and told them, as sure of myself as at eight: "I'm going to go live in Canada, with or without a diploma. That's where my dreams are waiting for me. And my bears."

They raised their eyebrows, and I left. Without the baccalauréat, which, for the record, I never got.

I was barely twenty when I set foot in Quebec for the first time, in Drummondville. I'd enrolled in fine arts, a field where I had roughly zero talent and quite a bit of nerve. With my catastrophic school record, the web programs had turned me down, and it was my only way into Canada. Every morning, in the

[15] Baccalauréat: the exam that ends high school in France. You need it to get into university.

biting cold of a Quebec fall, I walked a good forty minutes to school telling myself, proud as anything: "That's it, you did it, you're here!"

The cost of succeeding

The dream quickly met reality. Arriving in Quebec had put me in an impossible state of excitement, and then freedom started to look mostly like loneliness and cold, with choices that weren't easy to make.

My mother, hurt by my leaving, had imposed six months of silence on me. My parents helped me financially as best they could, but they didn't have much, and I lived mostly on the savings I'd been putting aside since I was sixteen (I'd worked every weekend and every school vacation until I was twenty). I ate pasta with cheese, and a hamburger patty now and then on weekends. That pretty much sums up my new life.

Luckily, Quebecers are generous, and that saved me. Strangers quickly became friends. They invited me to eat at their homes and introduced me to their traditions. One gave me an old winter coat, far too big for me, but warm as the arms of a grandfather I'd never had. A classmate pointed me to a food bank.

Another invited me to spend the holidays at her place, with her family.

I remember that first winter away from home well. Christmas 2006. There was a good twenty centimeters of snow, it was somewhere between minus five and plus five, and the sidewalks were icy. The town was full of decorations, and in the shop windows the lit-up reindeer seemed to be winking at passersby.

That evening, I was sitting at the big maple table of the family that had taken me in. The children were laughing, there was a fire in the fireplace. I should have felt good. And yet I had a dull sadness that didn't let go of me all evening.

At one point, while everyone was singing "Mon beau sapin" with that little accent I already loved, I got up saying I was going to get something from my coat. I went out for a few minutes, all alone. It was snowing softly. I walked to the little park at the end of the street, hands in my pockets with holes in them, and sat down on a frozen swing. I looked up at the sky and I cried. I couldn't hold it back.

It wasn't the cold. I didn't quite know what it was, at the time. Gratitude toward those people, I think, and

homesickness at the same time. I was sitting in the middle of the traditions of a people I admired, and thinking about a past I'd left without really saying goodbye.

I went back in shortly after, my face all red. Nobody asked any questions. One of the aunts, discreetly, put a blanket over my knees while I drank my hot chocolate, without a word. It did me a world of good.

Surviving to learn, learning to exist

My art history teacher had noticed I was comfortable with computers. She's the one who told me about Campus Ubisoft, a fairly prestigious program. I applied, and I was turned down, once again because of my school record. And then, a month before the start of term, a phone call: I was in. My portfolio had won over the recruiters.

Off to Matane[16]. No, not Manhattan! Matane, a small town at the far end of Quebec, where the wind never stops. There wasn't much to do there and living was cheap, but my savings were melting away at

[16] A town in the Gaspé region of eastern Quebec, on the St. Lawrence River, about 600 km from Montreal.

top speed all the same. And fairly soon there was no money left at all.

My parents offered me a plane ticket back to France. I refused. A second failure, I wouldn't have taken it. So I made a somewhat extreme choice: I lived in a tent, hidden in a small wood at the edge of town. A green army tent, bought secondhand from a classifieds site, that smelled of damp. I slept in there for a month, and a month is long.

I'm a solitary animal, and anyway I had almost nobody to talk to. I ate once a day, a packet of cheap ramen noodles, loaded with salt. I washed in secret in the showers of the school locker room, arriving early so as not to run into anyone. Sometimes the water was freezing, sometimes there wasn't even any soap left. But at least I felt clean, and at that point it mattered a lot to me.

I got up at six every morning, often frozen to the bone, to be first in the computer lab. In there, it was warm. I stayed until midnight, closing time, even on weekends. I looked very motivated. Really, it was mostly cold outside. And when I was programming,

I forgot the nights of shivering, the numb fingers and the empty stomach.

One night, exhausted, I fell asleep without my gloves. I'd told myself: "Just five minutes to rest my eyes." When I woke up, my hands wouldn't move. My fingers were swollen and red, almost purple, and every knuckle hurt. It was my first frostbite. In the days that followed, the skin on my hands peeled like a snake shedding, and I hid my bandages under sleeves that were too long so nobody would ask questions. That night was one of the hardest of my life, and not so much because of my hands. I felt alone to the point of disappearing. And on top of that I knew it was my fault: I'd gone too far out of pride, because I refused to fail a second time.

And still I held on.

My academic advisor eventually noticed the state I was in. She offered me a small contract, 3D modeling for an upcoming school project. Thanks to that, I got out of destitution and was able to rent a tiny room, where the closet was almost as big as the bed. The mattress creaked at the slightest movement and the window didn't close properly, but to me it was a

palace. I no longer needed to survive; I could finally start learning.

There was a door I could close, and a wobbly chair under a wobbly desk. I ate hot meals. It was home, and that's more or less where everything started.

But even with a roof and enough to eat, the anxiety didn't go away. I had that contract, fine, but I still had that dull fear that everything would collapse again. Every morning, pushing open the lab door, I told myself I might be an impostor.

At school, I fought. I knew I had one chance, not two. So I worked like a madman. I never went out; I turned down parties and breaks. Mostly, I was scared. Scared stiff of being caught up by what was wrong with me.

Some days I trembled handing in my work. The content, I knew it held up. The problem was that I felt my dignity depended on a grade, on what a teacher would think of it, on the look in his eyes. I was on alert all the time. It squeezed my temples, and strangely, it pushed me forward.

It's in that state that I learned to code fast, and to think far ahead. I didn't think too much about what I was doing. If I'd stopped to think about it, I would have collapsed, so I didn't stop.

It was an accelerated program, and I was determined to succeed whatever the cost. I finished top of my class. The school offered me a contract to teach technical level design [17] to the next cohort. That six-month contract had barely ended when Eidos, the studio everyone knew, hired me in Montreal. That was in 2008, as a technical designer, a fascinating and well-paid job.

I had an Eidos badge around my neck, and I was very young. On paper, it was the dream: a contract, a desk, a team, a salary. In reality, I was jumping without a net into a world whose social codes I didn't know at all. At school, I was the guy who had survived and finished top of the class. There, nobody knew me. I was a recruit with a slightly dubious

[17] Level design: designing the levels of a video game. That's where you lay out the paths, obstacles, enemies and secrets the player will go through.

background, a young Frenchman without a diploma catapulted into a ferocious industry.

Every morning, I had a knot in my stomach walking through the studio door. I was afraid they'd find out I was a fraud, that they'd ask me for a skill I didn't have. I was afraid of not getting a joke or a bit of jargon, or what was expected of me without anyone ever saying it. My technical English held up. For the rest, it was a lot less certain.

I made up for it with an almost obsessive rigor. I arrived earlier and left later. I documented everything, I anticipated requests. Every bug fixed was a small victory, and every silence in a meeting tortured me. I smiled, but I was never relaxed. It worked, and yet I couldn't enjoy it; I was always two inches from believing it was all about to come down.

Nothing came down. My work was noticed, then valued. Three years later, Ubisoft came back for me, with an offer I couldn't refuse: assistant director at twenty-four, on one of the most famous franchises in the world.

I was now working on Assassin's Creed. The success went beyond anything I imagined. The bonuses

were generous, and I was living a life I would never have dared to dream of. In five years I'd gone from total precariousness to incredible comfort: I ate in Michelin-starred restaurants and I led a talented team. The following year I was promoted to technical director in charge of artificial intelligence, and I went from one hit title to the next.

Today, when I think back to that icy tent and the days when I barely ate, I'm mostly grateful. I learned there that I was capable of quite a few things. Nothing went as planned, but there wasn't really a plan to begin with.

And no, I never saw a polar bear. Not even in Matane.



“Neither angel nor demon.
Only the echo of two storms.”

PART V: THE CURVE AND THE FALL

Long before that famous night, there had already been signs. Blurry weeks, months of exhaustion that were discreetly put down to tiredness or stress, or too much work.

In 2013, I was put on medical leave, for a long time: a leave that would last until 2014. They talked about burnout, and that was it. Nobody asked any other questions. The doctor looked at me with compassion, wrote me a sick note and a few antidepressants, and said: "You need to slow down."

I had felt at the bottom before, but never to the point of no longer functioning. In the morning I stayed sitting on the edge of the bed, unable to get up. The slightest movement cost me an enormous effort. My thoughts went around in loops and I didn't feel much of anything anymore. I watched my life from the outside, without feeling I was part of it.

I would have liked someone to dig, to look for what was under the symptoms. That's not what happened. Not yet.

And then there was the opposite. Periods when everything went too fast. I wrote dozens of emails at night, I launched five projects at once, I talked at top speed, one idea leading to another nonstop. Around me, people said I had "great energy." I felt like I was floating a little above the ground.

Around that time, a psychiatrist had brought up my borderline personality traits again, already mentioned at the ADHD Clinic. I'd nodded without really understanding. One more label. That lead was eventually set aside, much later: those traits were better explained by bipolar disorder.

And then there was that night, the one when everything collapsed for good.

I was 27. That evening earned me my first stay in a psychiatric hospital, and for a long time I hesitated to tell what led me there, because I was ashamed of it. Before my leave, I was that ambitious young director at Ubisoft, stringing together complicated meetings and all-nighters, 60 to 70 hours of work a week. I saw myself as a misunderstood genius, always looking for the quick, effective solution, and I solved

technical problems without effort. Nothing seemed impossible to me; everything seemed almost too easy.

I slept very little, I was always in action, competing with myself without really knowing why. And one evening in January 2014, in the middle of my medical leave, everything tipped over. My memories of that night are in pieces: a few very sharp images in the middle of the dark. The rest, I have from the incident report and from what people told me afterward.

What I know is that at three in the morning, two police officers found me in the street, in my underwear, barefoot in the snow, at minus ten. At first they thought I was drunk. I explained to them, very calmly at the start, that I wasn't cold, that the cold couldn't touch me, that I'd been chosen for something and they had to let me through. When they held out a blanket, I refused. When they insisted, I screamed that they worked for the company, that they'd been sent to stop me before I'd finished.

What I remember is the silence. The street was empty and white, and everything seemed placed there for me: the streetlights coming on one after another as I passed, a snowplow blinking three times, like an

answer. I couldn't feel my feet anymore, and I took that as one more proof. I kept telling myself I was going through a test, that I'd been watched for months, and that if I walked long enough everything would eventually be explained.

I was taken to the psychiatric hospital. I vaguely remember the flashing lights and the neighbors at their windows. Mostly I remember the humiliation, and refusing to give my name at the front desk because I thought it was dangerous. And strangely, I was also relieved.

I'm still ashamed telling about that night. The hardest thing to look at isn't the cold or the police officers. It's that, in the moment, everything was perfectly logical. I didn't have a single doubt. I didn't understand that I was sick; I understood that I was finally right. With time, I can talk about it without shaking.

Within the week, my doctor meets with the emergency physicians. I see social workers and psychologists, then psychiatrists. And all at once, everything fits back together: the burnout, the highs and the crashes that people close to me had noticed, the

borderline traits, and now an acute manic episode, flagrant, impossible to deny.

"Mr. Ageorges, we believe you are suffering from a condition called bipolar disorder."

More precisely, bipolar I disorder.

I remember what it did to me. I wasn't really surprised. I was relieved, and scared too. I said something to myself like: "Ah. So that's what it was. What I am."

But what exactly is bipolar disorder?

Euphoria enough to kill you

It never starts with madness. It starts with a very good week. I sleep four hours and wake up before the alarm, already thinking, with the feeling I've finally found the right speed. Everything I touch moves forward. At work, my goals fall faster than my boss can set them, and people tell me so:

"Wow, you look great!"

"Where on earth do you find the time to do all this?"

"You did this? Seriously?!"

I feel smarter, faster, funnier, and other people see it. Nobody worries about a guy who works a lot and has good ideas. Neither do I.

Then sleep melts away. Four hours, three hours, two. I don't experience it as a symptom but as a head start on everyone else: while they sleep, I gain hours. I talk faster and faster and I finish people's sentences to speed things up. When someone cuts me off or asks me to slow down, it really gets to me, with an anger I don't understand. I find them slow. In the nice stories about euphoria, nobody mentions this irritability, and yet it's there from the start.

The mania of winter 2014 was different. This time it didn't just speed up: it started to mean something. Traffic lights turned green when I stepped onto the road. A license plate repeated the digits of my birth date, then a second one, then a third. A song came on the radio at the exact moment I was thinking the same thing, and the lyrics were addressed to me. I didn't see coincidences. I'd spent my life spotting systems, and I had just found one, immense, with me at the center.

The money followed. I needed books, twenty at a time, on programming, neural networks, mathematics, and a new computer far more powerful than anything I needed, because I was going to write a program to talk with myself. When the credit card hit its limit, I went to the casino. I had a betting system[18], I felt incapable of losing, and the cards, I thought I could hear them. I also opened an account to do algorithmic trading[19], and trading by hand when the algorithm wasn't fast enough. I lost several thousand dollars, and I lost them with a smile.

Andrew came back. Not the buddy from my teens, the one who whispered me the answers on my math tests: a voice that had nothing of a game left in it. He told me I was on the right track, that I had to keep going, that the others didn't understand. For weeks, he was the only person I didn't distrust. Today, I know he doesn't exist. At the time, I didn't even ask myself the question.

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[18] A martingale: a betting system where you double your stake after every loss to win it back. On paper it looks foolproof. In reality it almost always ends in ruin.

[19] Algorithmic trading: buying and selling stocks automatically through a computer program.

At the same time, the suspicion rose, gently at first. I was convinced my game concept was so good that people wanted to take it from me. I started thinking someone was reading my emails, that my phone was listening to me, that colleagues, and maybe management, were waiting for me to break so they could grab my ideas. I stuck tape over my computer's camera. I unplugged the router, then plugged it back in, because that was exactly what they wanted me to do. Some calls, I stopped answering. The people who insisted became suspects, precisely because they insisted.

I wrote to my boss and to several members of the team, in the middle of the night, emails several pages long, with barely veiled accusations and instructions to protect the project. Some went to management. I didn't understand why nobody answered, or why the answers were so polite and so short. To me, that was proof they knew.

The rest came on its own. First, I believed I'd been chosen, for something big I couldn't name yet but could feel approaching. Then "chosen" became too small. I work in video games, so I ended up thinking the world ran like an engine, with its rules and its

strings, and that I had admin rights to it. All it took was thinking the right way for things to move. One evening, sitting on the floor in the middle of my notebooks, I told myself that if someone had to be God, it might as well be me, and that it explained everything, including why nobody understood me. I had a mission, and the time to finish it was running out. That's why I'd stopped sleeping. I experienced it as an obvious truth finally arriving.

Nothing could happen to me anymore. I crossed streets without looking, certain the cars would stop, and they almost always did. The January cold had no effect on me: I started going out without a coat, just to check. That lasted until the night I described earlier.

I had so many ideas I would have wanted five bodies to write them down. The notebooks filled with diagrams, arrows, numbers, sentences I underlined three times. Later, I tried to reread them. I understood nothing, except that on every page I was absolutely sure of myself.

I've always had this conviction, since I was little, of being made for an extraordinary destiny. At night, in

my childhood bedroom, I pictured myself receiving the Nobel Prize to applause, or the Fields Medal, the biggest award in mathematics. Sometimes it ran away with me: I became a billionaire, the champagne flowed, and journalists jostled at my door for a quick quote.

Other times I went off to Hollywood and my face was on every big screen, or else I composed a symphony that made everyone cry, even the toughest. And when I really let myself go, I became the very first human to talk with an intelligence from elsewhere, and my name went down in the history of the universe, no less.

Today, in the mirror in the morning, I see a normal guy, like everyone else. A Muggle[20] among Muggles. Those grandiose visions that seemed so real were my head making them up, out of what I'd always dreamed of being. When the chemistry runs wild, you no longer quite know where reality stops, and what was a childhood dream becomes a fact.

[20] In the Harry Potter universe, a Muggle is a person with no magical powers.

I don't think those dreams fooled me completely, that said. They still said something about what was going on in my head.

Manic phases, I've had quite a few: hypomania[21], micro-mania[22], full-blown mania. No two are alike, in intensity or in severity. Over time I've learned to recognize them, sometimes just before they arrive, sometimes right in the middle. They can last a day, a week... or six months.

The hardest thing to admit is that the beginning, I like it. I understand why some people stop their medication to get that energy back. I've done it. It never lasts long enough to be worth the price.

And then it drops, always. Not with a big bang: one morning I wake up and I no longer understand why I did all that. I look at the notebooks full of diagrams I can't read anymore, the credit card statement, the emails sent to my boss and to management, already read by people I'll still have to work with. The shame comes last, and it's enormous.

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[21] A milder form of mania, a period of euphoria and intense activity.
[22] My word for very short bursts of elation, from a few hours to two days. It's not an official medical term.

My thoughts slow down. Everything gets heavy; even breathing takes willpower. The projects I scribbled the day before, in full euphoria, look ridiculous to me now, completely unachievable.

Around me, people talk and laugh, they live their lives. I can barely hear them, and I don't feel like talking to anyone.

NOTHING RESPONDS ANYMORE

Two years have passed since the diagnosis. It's been six months without a mood swing. This morning looks like all the others, almost too smooth. I get up, take a shower, then an espresso in the old mug with a bear on it, a souvenir from another time.

I sit down at my screen and pretend to read my emails. It's very quiet at my place, a thick silence I don't like.

Something's off, and I can't say what. Winter is settling in, there's a little less sun every day, and a little less energy in me too.

Then it slides. I sleep twelve, fourteen hours and wake up as tired as when I went to bed. I only shower when a visitor is expected. I eat whatever's lying on

the counter, cereal, bread, or nothing. The dishes pile up. I stop answering messages and calls, and I cancel appointments at the last minute with excuses I no longer believe myself.

I feel like a failure, good for nothing but crying in silence. Nobody understands me. Around me, people repeat well-meaning phrases that are no use at all: "Make an effort!", "Do what you love!"

But what do you do when you don't love anything anymore? Nothing appeals to me, not even video games, not music, not the people I love. I know I should want something, and I feel nothing.

I drag myself to the kitchen for a glass of water, and my eyes land on a pair of scissors on the counter. I can't look away from them. What if I ended all this? Two years. Treatments tried, adjusted, dropped, resumed. For what? To fall back every time into this hole waiting for my slightest misstep.

I go back and sit on the edge of the bed, the scissors in my left hand. I cry without a sound. I cut into my right forearm, this arm I despise so much. I feel nothing; the pain in my head takes up all the room. So I

do it again. The blood stains the white sheets. I stay there without moving, half conscious[23].

Then I let go, and everything goes black.

I still don't know how the paramedics got there. When I come to, I'm in the ambulance, an oxygen mask on my face and an IV in my good arm. I'm told eight stitches. I'm going to spend two weeks in a psychiatric hospital, long enough to readjust, once again, a treatment I already know far too well.

It was only one episode among others. I've lost myself like that several times, sometimes less violently, sometimes in an even more destructive way. But I'm still here, in any case.

Guinea pig on prescription

After the diagnosis came the treatment. The goal was simple: get my head to stop racing.

[23] If you're having suicidal thoughts, don't stay alone. In Canada, call or text 988. In France, call 3114. These lines are free, open 24 hours a day, and there's someone there to listen.

I was prescribed lithium[24], at a fairly high dose, with a blood test every three months to check the level wasn't becoming toxic. At the same time, they put me on Seroquel XR, the extended-release version, so the effect would hold all day. Seroquel XR switched me off. No more bright ideas, no more drive, no more urge to write, and my creativity left along with my insomnia. I was drowsy from morning to night, my head slow, my emotions smothered. I wasn't manic anymore, fine. I wasn't really me anymore either.

I held on like that for two years. Then the depression came back, quietly, through the service entrance, nothing spectacular. I didn't feel like anything and I was tired with a tiredness sleep didn't fix. So we stopped the lithium, which was judged too heavy and, in the end, not effective enough. We added an antidepressant. Then a new antipsychotic, Risperdal [25], more discreet, they said, more

[24] Lithium is the reference mood stabilizer for bipolar disorder. It requires regular blood tests, because the gap between an effective dose and a toxic one is small.

[25] Risperdal: brand name of risperidone, an atypical antipsychotic.

"targeted." In practice it knocked me out about as much as the other one.

We adjusted the doses to the milligram. Nothing really took.

So I went from one trial to the next, for four years. One molecule, then another, telling myself each time that maybe this would be the one. With every change you had to wait weeks to know if it worked, and it almost never did.

And then one day, two little capsules changed the game. Effexor XR in the morning, Latuda in the evening. There was nothing magical about them; they worked, that's all. The big manias disappeared; I was left with small, rather pleasant hypomanias, harmless ones. The bottomless depressions went too, and in their place I had a few gray days I got through without much trouble. For three years, everything went well. Too well, no doubt, because one morning I woke up with an idea in my head: "What if I'm not bipolar?" Maybe I was just hypersensitive, misunderstood, a bit depressive and a bit of an artist, and it was the medication that was making me apathetic.

So I stopped everything. Overnight[26].

What followed was fairly predictable, except to me. The insomnia came first, then the paranoia: I felt people were looking at me strangely, that sounds no longer had the same texture, and that my head was going to give out. One evening, luckily, I had a moment of clarity in the middle of it all. I knew what was going to happen. I knew the road, and I didn't want to go back down it. I opened my emergency medicine cabinet and took out the Seroquel my psychiatrist had told me to keep "just in case."

600 mg, in one dose. A controlled crash, if you like. The next day I went back on my two faithful ones, venlafaxine and lurasidone, with a few others as backup, and I got going again. Since then I've held steady, even if I still wobble now and then. I still have highs, 48-hour micro-manias when I laugh too loud, when ideas go off in every direction and I send texts at three in the morning. They don't carry me off anymore. After two days, it drops.

SURVIVING, ONE DAY AT A TIME

[26] Never stop a psychiatric treatment all at once without talking to your doctor. This passage shows why.

Day to day, bipolar disorder doesn't let go of me, and it's when I wake up that I feel it most. I surface lost, disoriented, and it takes me a moment to put things back in place, as if I had to relearn, a little clumsily, how to be me every morning. Still half asleep, I grab three little colored pills, a gesture as ordinary as brushing my teeth. In the evening, four other tablets wait their turn so I can sleep. Saez[27] has a song about those pills you swallow to sleep. It often comes back to me at night, when I take them, and it makes me smile, a bit sourly.

Every morning, I wonder what the day is going to look like. Gray, maybe, with a depression that crushes everything and where the slightest movement becomes impossible, for weeks, sometimes six months, living in a lethargy that suffocates me and with the feeling that life is going by without me. Or far too bright, with an energy I can't control, ideas going off in every direction and projects springing up by the dozen, until reality catches up with them all at once.

[27] Damien Saez, French singer-songwriter.

Living with bipolar I disorder means spending your time adjusting. You test treatments one after another, like a guinea pig, and stability is never won for good. I see my psychiatrist every two weeks. She looks at where my mood is and corrects what needs correcting. When I start climbing too high and a manic episode is coming on, the antipsychotics are what bring me back. When I go down, the antidepressants are what hold me.

This treatment, I need it to live. It has a price all the same. It blunts my emotions and my creativity, and some days my sharpness disappears completely: I'm there without being there. Sometimes I'm so neutral that even sadness doesn't make it to tears. And other times everything gives way at once, an emotion lands on me with a completely disproportionate force and I don't know what to do with it.

The illness also damages self-esteem, and relationships. A date that's going well, a candlelit dinner, we smile at each other, and then comes the moment when I have to explain why those little pills are part of my life and what they mean for what comes next. And then you have to start over with friends, then with family. I watch them search for something to

say, and often not find it. Sometimes I hear, under their breath or to my face: "You're exaggerating," or worse: "It's all a fad." As if I were doing all this to get attention.

There are also sillier things, the kind you tell afterward with half a smile. One manic night, around two in the morning, I decided to repaint my whole apartment bright red, convinced it would change my mood forever. Another time, at the bottom of a depression, I stood motionless for five hours in front of the open fridge, unable to decide whether I was hungry or just wanted to feel the cold numb me.

Sometimes I think the illness has made me more attentive to people, to what they don't say. In the meantime, there are the three pills in the morning and the four at night.

Part V: The curve and the fall



“Not the life I had planned. But it suits me.”

PART VI: NO BOX FITS ME

THE WEIGHT OF WORDS

There are words you don't choose that end up sticking to your skin, a bit like a tattoo you never asked for. "Bipolar," "homosexual," "ADHD," "gifted," "immigrant"... We stick them on people who are too complicated to describe, like a label on a box, and that way nobody has to open the box to know what's inside. Well, they think they know.

At first, these words serve a purpose; I won't say otherwise. They make it possible to name what can't be seen and to give legitimacy to pain nobody talks about. The trap is reducing the person to the word. Believing that saying "bipolar" is enough to understand a whole life, and a brain that never stops moving.

When I was told, "You have bipolar I disorder," at first I was relieved. I finally had an explanation for what had been happening to me for years. It didn't last very long. In other people's eyes, the word didn't explain anything at all; it locked me in. It served as an excuse, and sometimes even as a weapon: "Oh, you're reacting like that because you're bipolar." As if my

ideas, my passions, my excesses and my silences were nothing but a list of symptoms out for a walk.

Same with "homosexual." For years I kept it to myself, under lock and key. The day I said it, it set me free, honestly. Except that there again, the word became a shortcut. "Oh, you're gay? I never would have guessed." Or else: "Oh, that explains why you're sensitive, artistic..." As if loving a man came with a checklist.

And "gifted," then? That one was thrown at me like a compliment, almost like a superpower. In practice, it mostly gave me a feeling of being out of step with other people, and quite a bit of loneliness. "You're smart, you're bound to succeed." Understanding fast has never meant knowing how to live; I'm well placed to know that.

ADHD? I was told, and I believed it. Above all, I was blamed for it, as if my mess were laziness and my forgetting a fault. People like labels when they confirm what they already thought, and generally, they use them to judge.

All these labels say something, it's true. They don't talk about the shame, or the rage. They say nothing

about the good days either, the times I was brave without anyone noticing. They freeze in someone what, in reality, keeps moving.

Today, I'm at peace with these words, most of the time at least. I don't reject them, and I no longer identify with them blindly. They're part of me. They're landmarks, they help me find my way, and I ask nothing more of them.

What people see, often, is the word. Behind it, there's someone trying to move forward with a backpack full of labels, who would really like it if one day someone took the time to read what's behind the letters.

I am bipolar, homosexual, ADHD, gifted, an immigrant.

And my name is Sébastien.

I AM NOT A DIAGNOSIS

For a long time I believed I was broken. Hypersensitive, moods like a sawblade, thoughts going around in loops: I felt like I'd left the factory with a defect, and had no one to report it to.

The first time anyone talked to me about mental health, it sounded mostly like an admission of failure, almost like a summons to go and look at myself differently. At first I was ashamed. Ashamed of not measuring up, of admitting that my brain needed help. I felt that asking for help made me someone weak, and that this kind of suffering should stay hidden behind polite smiles and nicely packaged productivity.

Then came the diagnoses, one after the other: ADHD, bipolar disorder, and even, for a while, borderline traits. Each time, I thought it would lighten the load. It didn't really. I had one more word, which changed how people looked at me and did nothing for the pain inside.

I've taken a lot of medication. Each one was a bet: less pain in exchange for a little less of me. Seroquel stole my mornings and Effexor put my tears to sleep. Latuda stabilized me, and I still don't quite know what it cost me. Without that chemistry, I might have gone under, so I learned to live with it.

With time, I ended up seeing things a little differently. My mind sometimes hurts the way other

people's backs hurt. The difference is that it doesn't show on an MRI, and the people who judge don't hear much of what's going on inside.

So I stopped apologizing for being unstable, or off the mark. I stopped asking forgiveness for what I am and for what I'm not. I've never met a normal person. I've met a lot of people who pretend to pull it off.

Today, I live with my diagnoses. They're part of the story. I don't tell everyone about them, and some days I barely think about them, which is already progress compared to before.

I'm not a DSM[28], or a clinical case. I'm a guy who's a bit all over the place, who takes his pills morning and night.

VIDEO GAMES AS A MIRROR OF THE SELF

Creating worlds, for me, has always meant inventing a place where I could breathe. Even before I knew who I was, I put into my projects what I couldn't put

[28] Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It's the international reference for diagnosing psychiatric disorders.

anywhere else, the good and the not so good, in pieces, but without cheating.

Code taught me rigor, and design taught me that any system, even a very logical one, keeps a share of arbitrariness and instinct that can't be explained.

I spent years in Unreal's blueprints[29], connecting nodes with wires. When I worked on the artificial intelligence of the characters, I caught myself thinking I was doing the same thing inside my head: states, transitions, triggers. It didn't cure me, but it helped me put words to certain things.

Designing a level means organizing a space: you lay out the paths, you hide things in the corners. And often, what I thought I'd placed "by logic" came from a much more personal memory. Some dark rooms, I know where they come from.

Video games, often looked down on by people who've never touched them, were a refuge for me. Where others found me unstable, or too sensitive and at the same time too analytical, this field made room for me, real room. My hyperfocus became a

[29] A scripting system in video game creation software.

quality, and my imagination spilling out everywhere, a skill people came looking for.

It's in those invented worlds that I was able to express myself without having to justify it, and that's where I understood that a disorder can become useful if you give it a framework.

When I look at a game I worked on, I see textures and mechanics. I also see pieces of me.

To the child, to the man, to tomorrow

If I had it to do over, I don't think I'd change much. I'm not saying that out of pride. Even the worst moments ended up making the man I am, and I don't really know who I'd be without them. I learned humility by failing, and strangely, my rages taught me to listen a little better. As for the diagnoses, they weigh heavy some days, but they forced me to go look at corners of my head I never would have gone to on my own.

From all this work on myself, what I mostly take away is that I'm not alone with my fears and my excesses. It took me a long time to dare to talk about

them. The times I did, people came closer instead of leaving, which surprised me quite a bit.

To the child I was, I'd say: you're not weird, there's just a lot of room in there. Your inner world scares you, I know. You can go in anyway; there's nothing mean in there.

To the teenager I was, I'd say to stop fighting to be loved, and to start by loving himself a little. The ones who don't understand don't deserve all that anger. There'll be plenty of them, anyway.

To the man I'll be later, I mostly ask to stay tender and not turn cynical. To keep creating, too, and to hold on to the urge to marvel, even on gray days.

And to you reading these lines: I have no advice to give you. I'm still rewriting this book myself, so there you go.

I don't have all the answers. I've learned to laugh at my episodes, sometimes, and to love anyway, including when I overflow.



“Even labyrinths are gentler when you walk in together.”

EPILOGUE

THE WHISPER UNDER THE MASKS

Maybe you were expecting a happy ending. I don't really have one. There's no lesson at the end, just what I was able to tell with an open heart, and it still hurts in places.

You've just read the story of a boy who slept a month in a tent and nearly disappeared from loneliness during a Quebec winter. He was committed at 27, after a manic episode he didn't see coming. And that same boy became a technical director at one of the biggest video game companies in the world. No miracle in there, a lot of stubbornness, and people around him.

I have ADHD and I'm bipolar. I'm gay too. And no, I'm not sorry.

I spent my life trying to conform, to fit into boxes. The nice boy, the model employee, the troubled genius, the brave victim: those roles, you can stick them where I'm thinking. What helped me was to stop playing them, one by one, sometimes losing a few feathers along the way.

This book is a raised finger to every norm that was forced on me. To the shrinks who looked at me like a thesis topic and the teachers who thought I was done for. To the ones who found me too much, or not enough, as well. A well-written middle finger, I hope, but a middle finger all the same.

If you recognized yourself in this mess, good. If it bothered you, even better. Maybe you too grew up with that feeling of being a stranger stuck to your skin, and spent your life apologizing for existing, smoothing yourself down until it damaged you.

Stop, seriously. It doesn't work, and it's exhausting. You don't have to please the people who described you before they knew you.

I still doubt, sometimes. Often, even. I wonder whether what I've built doesn't come partly from a flight I mistook for ambition. I don't have the answer.

I haven't understood everything about my life and I haven't found peace. I've found a voice, at least, and I don't intend to lose it.

This book is for the ones who don't fit, and who are tired of apologizing for it.

I was born off to the side and I've lived on the margins. Today, I draw my straight line right through the middle of their fucking mess. Thank you for reading this far.



“Tenderness made no sound.
It was there all along, though.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To those who held my hand without always understanding where I was going, and who kept walking beside me anyway.

To my sister, Céline, or rather "Jojotte," as I've always called her and as she liked people to. My double, and my refuge on dull days. Without you, a lot of pages would be missing from this life.

To Christophe, my brother, more private than me and more tender than he lets on. Over time, you brought down quite a few walls between us. Thank you for those silences, which no longer scare me.

To Mom and Dad. I judged you a lot, questioned you a lot, and loved you a lot too. Despite the clumsiness and the words that went further than the thought behind them, there was always a hot plate and a blanket at the foot of the bed for me. And a worried look, often.

To Cléo, my niece. When you laugh, I forget the past a little and I want to see what comes next. I wish you a life without labels!

To Mélanie Soulié, my childhood friend found again.

We've known each other since kindergarten. We lost touch, we crossed paths again, and it came back at the moment I needed it most. A friendship made of time, absences and reunions. We each grew up on our own side, each with our labels, which we'd ended up finding normal from wearing them so long. And then one day you came back, and you read my words seeing what was between the lines. You corrected me without ever making me feel corrected. You saw this manuscript through to the end, without making a sound, knowing where you were going. Thank you for carrying this book with me. Thank you for backing me and rereading me, for understanding me. And for recognizing me.

And then there's you, my psychiatrist. You were there when things were really bad. You listened to me straight, you supported me without judging, and you never locked me into a label. Your silences sometimes helped me more than any diagnosis. Thank you for believing in the man behind the disorder.

This book was born in a period when, inside my head, nothing was in its place anymore. You're all in it, each in your own way, because you're the ones who brought me back.

Acknowledgments

CLINICAL APPENDIX

This account touches on several neuropsychiatric disorders through a personal experience. This book does not claim to be a therapeutic guide. It offers a subjective immersion in these states. For any medical or diagnostic matter, please consult a qualified health professional. For information only, here are a few simplified definitions:

DISORDERS

ADHD

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. A brain development disorder characterized by difficulty sustaining attention, a tendency toward impulsivity, and sometimes motor restlessness. In adults, it often shows up as forgetfulness, interrupted tasks, mental overload and difficulty organizing thought over time. It is recognized as a neurodevelopmental disorder in the DSM-5-TR, appearing in childhood and possibly persisting into adulthood.

GIFTEDNESS

Giftedness, or high intellectual potential. We speak of giftedness when the intelligence quotient (IQ) is

generally above 130. It is not a disorder but an atypical way of thinking. It often comes with branching thought, a deep need for meaning, emotional hypersensitivity, and great intellectual reactivity.

This way of thinking can illuminate as much as it overwhelms, sometimes creating a feeling of being out of step, of inner loneliness, or of not fitting into the world.

Bipolar I disorder

A mood disorder characterized by alternation between so-called "manic" phases (elation, pressured speech, hyperactivity, grandiosity, risky behavior) and depressive phases, often deep and disabling. Mania can sometimes lead to psychotic episodes or emergency hospitalization.

It is a chronic condition, rooted in the biology of the brain, requiring long-term medication, rigorous psychiatric follow-up and, often, retraining of emotional stability.

It is an extreme swing between burning heights and silent depths, a disorder that should be neither minimized nor romanticized.

Medications

Seroquel XR

Seroquel XR (extended-release quetiapine) is an atypical antipsychotic medication used mainly to treat schizophrenia, bipolar disorder (manic and depressive episodes) and, in combination with other antidepressants, major depressive disorder in adults.

Effexor XR

Effexor XR (generic name: extended-release venlafaxine) is an antidepressant in the class of serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). It is used mainly to treat major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder and social anxiety disorder in adults.

Latuda

Latuda (generic name: lurasidone) is a second-generation atypical antipsychotic, taken orally, used mainly to treat schizophrenia and depressive episodes associated with bipolar I disorder in adults and some children.

Vyvanse

Vyvanse (generic name: lisdexamfetamine) is a central nervous system stimulant, used mainly to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children from age 6 and in adults, as well as moderate to severe binge eating disorder in adults.

Classification of mood episodes

Low mood

Low mood, or "feeling down," is a non-medical term often used for a passing state of sadness, mental fatigue or discouragement. It is part of the normal fluctuations of mood and is not a psychiatric disorder in itself.

Unlike clinical depression, low mood:

- Does not significantly impair daily functioning (work, relationships, daily habits);
- Is not lasting: it is generally transient (a few days to a few weeks);
- Is not necessarily accompanied by marked neurovegetative symptoms (sleep disturbance, loss of appetite, psychomotor slowing, suicidal thoughts).

Low mood can occur in reaction to a difficult life event (bereavement, separation, work stress...) and does not systematically require medical treatment, but rather rest and social or psychological support.

Depression

Depression (or major depressive episode) is a psychiatric disorder characterized by a lasting and significant disturbance of mood. It is not limited to passing sadness, but comes with a set of emotional, cognitive, physical and behavioral symptoms that interfere with daily life.

Main diagnostic criteria (according to ICD-10):

To diagnose depression, symptoms must be present nearly every day for at least two weeks, and include at least two of the three so-called "core" symptoms:

- Depressed mood (deep sadness, frequent crying, hopelessness)
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities usually enjoyed
- Marked fatigue or loss of energy

Hypomania

Hypomania is a milder form of mania, characterized by an abnormally elevated mood, but less severe than in a manic episode. It is part of bipolar II disorder, but it is also found in bipolar I and in other mood disorders.

Diagnostic criteria (according to the DSM-5):

A hypomanic episode is defined by:

- An abnormally elevated, expansive or irritable mood, accompanied by increased activity or energy,
- Lasting at least 4 consecutive days, continuously.

It must be accompanied by at least three symptoms (four if the mood is only irritable), among:

- Inflated self-esteem or grandiosity
- Decreased need for sleep
- Pressured speech (a need to talk constantly)
- Racing thoughts or flight of ideas
- Distractibility
- Increase in goal-directed activity or psychomotor agitation

- Excessive involvement in potentially risky activities

What sets hypomania apart:

Social or occupational functioning may be improved or only slightly impaired, unlike in mania.

There is no major break with reality: no psychotic symptoms, no hospitalization required.

The episode is often experienced positively by the person, who feels more effective, creative or energetic, which can delay diagnosis.

Mania

Mania is a pathological state of elevated mood that is part of bipolar I disorder. It corresponds to an abnormal, persistent and marked elevation of mood, accompanied by psychomotor hyperactivity, excessive self-confidence and impaired judgment.

Diagnostic criteria (according to the DSM-5). Symptoms must:

- Last at least one week (or less if hospitalization is required),
- Be present most of the day, every day,

- Cause marked impairment in social, occupational or personal functioning, or require hospitalization.

The manic state includes at least three (or four if the mood is only irritable) of the following symptoms:

- Inflated self-esteem, grandiosity
- Decreased need for sleep (e.g., feeling rested after 2-3 hours)
- Pressured speech (an irrepressible need to talk)
- Flight of ideas, racing thoughts
- Distractibility
- Increase in goal-directed activity (work, sexuality, multiple projects)
- Excessive involvement in activities with a high potential for painful consequences (reckless spending, risky sexual behavior, impulsive decisions)

Severity:

Mania is often disabling. It can lead to loss of behavioral control, marked disinhibition, and even psychotic symptoms (delusions of grandeur, hallucinations).

THE RÉSUMÉ OF MY LABELS

1986 Born in Olivet, France.

1993 WISC-III test (IQ 132), first psychology consultations.

1994 Death of my paternal grandfather, Didier.

1998 Started baton twirling.

2001 First French champion title. Repeated eighth grade.

2003 Discovered cannabis in tenth grade.

2004 Second French champion title. Repeated a year a second time.

2006 Left for Canada.

2007 A month in a tent in Matane.

2008 Started my career in the video game industry.

2010 ADHD diagnosis.

2012 Technical director at Ubisoft.

2013-2014 Professional burnout.

2014 Psychiatric hospitalization, bipolar I diagnosis.

2017 Came out, owned my homosexuality.

2020 Started venlafaxine and lurasidone.

2022 Technical director at Bandai Namco.

2025 Wrote No Box Fits Me.