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Monsieur Minus

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Bertrand Le Marec was 5' 8" inches tall, and he loved to walk. He travelled on roads steadily and nimbly, as if he were cycling, adapting his gear to the slope of the land. He favored the monotony of long, quiet fields. In the morning, the dew darkened his shoes to the color of sand; in the afternoon, the sun and the wind tanned his skin which was covered in blond hair. He had two blue eyes set in his face and a microchip in his arm.

He walked every day, sometimes covering distances of nineteen to twenty-two miles. He wasn't looking to score a sports performance, or beat any records. What interested him was the perseverance in the endeavor. He reached, in the exercise of walking, a trance-like state, or rather, his original state. He travelled in grace. Through all kinds of weather.

Today, for example, it was foggy. A fog so dense that it was difficult to say, off the top, where one was, exactly. You couldn't see further than 19 feet, be it a field of corn on the right and the first waves of a meadow on the left, or the road straight ahead, in the middle. Beyond, it was a nebulous blur, but nothing was really unknown, because the same landscape, one easily imagined, kept on going with, no doubt, some seasonal variants, sugar beets, potatoes – the rape had already been recently harvested. In any case, we were, most definitely, in an agricultural region. Maybe in Brie, with Provins not far away.

Must it be clarified that we were at the end of August, the beginning of September? A fog such as this during this time of year was rare. Bertrand was not surprised. In general, he was content to notice reality which he registered with a glance - how about that, there's fog today – without getting into it, or asking questions. It could also have been snowing. Living was easy. Some might have added, "Dull, he's a bit dull." Members of the board of directors, amongst themselves: "He's a bit of an idiot, isn't he?"

He made headway in a setting scaled down by closeness which made the visible world more familiar, more likeable. There was less to see, more to love. This stone by the side of the road, lying there for blurry eyes; this humble shrub, hiding a missing forest which proves to be considerate; the ground itself, opposite distance which has been confiscated, becomes an outstretched hand. The walker is comforted by a countryside hidden by minute details, subtlety. Bertrand was the only one in the world on his small island of visibility. Trusting, he was not worried about ghosts looming up from the fog. Nevertheless, he looked out for the red and white beacons.

Red and white: The Grand Hike, also known as the GH. Not to be confused with the yellow and red: Grand Country Hike. Concerning the term, Bertrand didn't like hiker very much; it lacked amateurism. He preferred walker, or land-surveyor. His itineraries were the objective of scrupulous preparations - only to be left behind along the road later. He ordered guidebooks, he bought maps, he made up index cards. The goal was to compose a journey as long as possible of several weeks, to be undisturbed, and to do nothing more but follow the program. He made up his daily trips in advance and had two copies printed. This is what stuck out of the pants pocket of his right thigh. In light of this information, his back pack suddenly seemed very small; one expected a style which carried at least 16 gallons, crammed to the brim, when it hardly held 7 gallons, flattened - a school boy's book bag, a loser's shoulder bag. A bottle of lemonade occupied a side compartment; he stretched out his arm to grab it without stopping. He drank from the bottle, and returned it to its place with a practiced gesture.

Hiking had adopted the ski poles from Nordic skiing and, because the accessory had entered into usage, one could not help but smile at the sight of these skiers without skis who had simply abandoned the sport of sliding. Maybe one day there will be automobile drivers, steering wheel in hand, without cars. Bertrand had opted for a pilgrim's staff, a stick made of beech, as tall as his shoulder, which the road had literally placed in the area across his path in the leaves which were strewn along the ground. He had not seen it, and it got tangled up in his feet; he fell flat on his face. Since then, he had not parted with it. He had lightly stripped the wood around the hand and, with daily rubbing, the stick had slowly become polished, like a hand railing, under the palm.

The fog lifted and the horizon was revealed, and it was like lifting off. All of a sudden, he was placed in the arrangement of the world, a small fellow in the middle of a field of light on its writing line. A distant village drew his attention, like a sail at sea, sheltering life. When he started walking, which has been about two years now, Bertrand had loved the grandeur of the skies. He had gotten in the habit of tilting his head back to throw himself into it. In town, the sky was just an opening, a "pulling up the hood". It's a simple sight from the window of our lives. Whereas, in reality, it includes us, it holds us. The percentage of the sky when one is walking in the open countryside is close to 80%. It is no longer the place in time which one consults before getting dressed. It's the pupil of the universe. One looks at the sky as much as one is looked at. It's the sky that makes one shy. Bertrand always urinated under a tree: aiming for the trunk, but also on the foliage which hid him from the sky.

Bertrand Le Marec stopped for lunch. He chose, whenever it was possible, the bank of a river, the shore of a pond, the stone seat of a wash house, the curb of a well. A place where there was water seemed, to him, to be a good spot which justified taking a break. For this lunch time, he didn't find anything better: it will be the weak flow of dying water - muddy, greenish - like a pond which would ooze, buggy with some chloroformed dragonflies, the den of zombie mosquitoes. The poor stream was in such a state that it had, without doubt, lost its name, a former small trout river destroyed by intensive agriculture. On the map it wasn't mentioned by a name; it was represented by a tiny blue line on the edge of being wiped out. Bertrand just passed marker Number 6, Number 7 should be around two miles; he was at one with nature. He sat down on a neglected log, which made for a decent seat, because the bank had been cleared.

What did he have to eat today? He pulled out a sandwich wrapped in tin foil which he undertook to unwrap. At each end of the package the paper had been twisted like a candy wrapper. He lifted the bread to see what was inside: grilled, marinated eggplant, cured ham, cheese, pine nuts - one of his favorite sandwiches. He munched with appetite; life is good!

Bertrand Le Marec was the sole heir of the top fortune in France. Leather goods, luxury products, fashion - the LM Group has an equal presence in media and large distribution, with total business figures of more than 50 billion. Founded in 1890 by George Le Marec, the firm had continued to develop and diversify its activities, remaining, nevertheless, a family-run firm, from its origins to the present day. As such, the Le Marec Group was introduced as LM. Bertrand had warned them: all of that did not interest him, not one bit. No one should count on him. To the board of directors, who wanted to uphold his future, he had declared you can get along very well without me, keep on going! and he had not set foot there again. He left the conference room, on the twentieth floor of the LM tower at La Défense, his forehead shiny, his armpits damp, exhausted by being managed, relieved to have settled the question for the last time. Just one requirement had been made of him, as an aside - that he agreed to have a microchip implanted as a precaution; to know where he was - one never knows. If that made them happy, so be it, and he had made an appointment.

He was given the contact details for a private clinic in Belgium. It was a matter of discretion. He had been instructed to register under a false name, as well. If need be, someone could accompany him. He had always been bored stiff by this whole scene, this paranoid mistrust in view of his so-called well-known personage. As a child, he took a perverse pleasure early on in the habit of rebelling against the dictated rules of his entourage; primarily, his father's. He loved giving the slip to his driver and body guard, who was supposed to take him to school, to bicycle on back roads through the woods. He would hide furtively before his departure and

recuperate his bicycle hidden in a thicket, threading his way through a secret opening in the surrounding wall of the estate. The driver/body guard waited for him in front of the school with the governess. He was severely scolded and his father's name was brandished as a threat. Never mind, he was happy that he had run away – with short breath, reddened ears.

Growing up, his opposition to the life they expected him to live aggravated him. An interjection summarized his protest pretty well: fuck off! Fuck you all! His English was very spontaneous, fortifying; the private classes bore their fruit. At 13, he was sent to a boarding school in Switzerland, at the decision of his father. His mother said nothing, remaining quiet and stepping aside, appearing as little as possible, retiring to her rooms; no one saw her during the day. Paternal hope was placed in the work of time, in maturation. Bertrand would change, inevitably; he would become reasonable and would conduct himself, at the end of the day, like a worthy heir. He returned from Switzerland for summer vacation. He had perfected his German: fick dich!

But time only reinforced Bertrand's opinions. At the age of 44 - in three weeks, exactly - he had finally given up on his father. The two men didn't see each other anymore. For the moment, the old man was still at the helm. One could have said that he gathered his strength from his son's obstinate estrangement; that he forbid, almost out of fear, the future of the group without its captain. His wife had not given him another child; he had to live, not die, at all costs. He ran six miles a day and followed the Cretan diet to the letter with the help of a coach. He didn't have any grand children to take over. He was, nevertheless, able to obtain from his only son an agreement that he hold, symbolically, the post of president of LM upon his death so that the firm could remain private. The board of directors would be in charge of everything; they were trustworthy individuals. Bertrand would have only to produce his signature once a year, looking elsewhere if he liked while he signed.

His mother was still alive, despite appearances. Her son visited her on her birthday to add, loudly, in front of her, a year to her age: 78...79...80. Oh! You are hitting the next ten! She had totally stopped talking. She lived with lowered eyes; she looked at people below the waist. Bertrand wasn't sad; he was a bit frustrated. He would have loved to hear his mother say a dirty word - "fucking shit" - or maybe something like "I love you".

He made an appointment at the clinic under the name of Bertrand Minus. It came to him when he was on the phone - he hadn't prepared anything - by thought associations, no doubt - microchip, Minus - the 16th, at 3 o'clock, does that suit you, Mr. Minus? The idea of dragging himself around with a tracker in his body in no way pleased him, but it was part of several necessary concessions in order to

have peace. Frankly, it wasn't complicated once he accepted and integrated it into his point of view. He was capable of the effort; he knew how to smooth the edges.

He travelled to Brussels alone. He had been told that the intervention was very simple, quick, and nearly painless; the equivalent of a blood test, as it were. He would take advantage of a stroll through the Belgian capital; he would return the following day. So, he reported to the reception desk of the clinic, a discreet establishment with a copper plaque at the entrance of a new building next to a law firm and a certified public accountant. The receptionist pronounced his name with a grain of salt; fearing that he might be upset, she muffled the last letter between her lips. Bertrand recaptured it nicely – MinuS – with a sorrowful smile. One doesn't choose one's name.

The microchip was injected under the triceps, in the loose skin, by a single use hypodermic syringe. Bertrand removed his shirt and sat down in an arm chair. He didn't have many muscles, his chest was abundantly covered in hair, his light skin, speckled; his stomach bolstered by a roll of flesh spilling over his belt. When someone does not have many physical assets he undresses quickly. The surgeon disinfected the area with a soaked cotton ball. He seemed extremely polite; the act being very brief, he tried hard to fill the time, avoiding, however, any intrusion, even when he was implanting the microprocessor with GPS - "it isn't very nice weather today, we have the Museum of Eroticism and Mythology nearby if that tempts you, if you have a moment. There are beautiful rooms, it's cheerful..." The surgeon passed a pocket scanner over the microchip to verify its activation. He would be able to be located up to 16 feet, permanently. Bertrand left with the brochure, which cost us \$1825.00. Please. Mister Minus.

After his sandwich, by way of dessert, he had a piece of flan in a Tupperware container. He held the pastry in two hands to carry it to his mouth. Seated on his log in the country under the sky he was perfectly at home; he had the place of honor in his kingdom. He licked his fingers, before consulting his itinerary. He had to follow the road, then turn right and walk alongside a forest; he would reach marker Number 7; only about seven miles left to go. A glassful of lemonade, and he hit the road again.

We owe the paths of the Grand Hike, with its white and red milestones, to Jean Loiseau, master walker, who started the project after the war; the first layout would be inaugurated in Orleans on Sunday, August 31, 1947. The advantage of the GHs is that they recommend long routes, maintained and marked, described in the splendid Topoguides from which Bertrand drew his index cards for his daily

hikes, complete with a Blue Series French National Geographical Institute map, one of 25000 printed. Each day constituted one piece of the puzzle, a section, a stage, at the same time a goal, separate from the whole, and a personal accomplishment. This Tuesday, he was, for example, on the twelfth day of a 419 mile trip which made up the GH 11. He moved forward step by step, and this sum provided the thread of his life. He didn't need anything else.

The open air had become a drug. It marked the return to reality, to the elements. After childhood, he had broken with the outdoors and enclosed himself in the underground. He wanted to become a painter. His studio was in a basement in town. He painted the darkness. He didn't search for the light at the end of the tunnel, but followed a labyrinth. He plunged into darkness. His paintings were canvases of inextricable night. That lasted for several years. He stopped, from now on laying blame on his body. He stopped eating, testing the limits of his strength. He walked a tightrope above a void. He fell, and it's the drip line that caught him. That lasted for some time. Then it was alcohol. Following that, there were trial experiments in an attempt to feel an attachment to life. He would turn 40. He bottomed out. It was an entirely new understanding. He won knowledge and strength. Freedom is both of these.

He discovered walking by accident, after running out of gas on the road. Armed with a bottle of water, he headed for a service station. He was on a secondary road with no traffic at the beginning of the afternoon. The temperature was mild, spring-like. He glided along the shoulder of the pavement, trimmed by grass, along a national forest. He wore dress shoes with a thin sole and he felt the landscape of the ground, the stones, the clods of earth, the twigs, the shells which acted on the soles of his feet like acupuncture needles which seemed to activate a network of sensations travelling through his body, all the way to his temples, to his scalp which created a sort of diffuse buzzing, an ear massage. So he perceived the world through a new entrance, which had been unknown, through the details, the grain, the skin's bloom. He felt affable, a feeling of unity. On the side of this road he had found a way, an offering. He strolled quite a while before unearthing a service station. On the way back he decided he would walk again tomorrow, and the following days, making it his pleasure, his job, his faith.

At the beginning he fumbled about. Then, bit by bit, he became battle-hardened to exercise. He had progressed in endurance and had nailed long distances. His legs had muscles, his back straightened. His body had become more agile, armed with reflexes; his ankles learned to turn, his knees to absorb shock. One thing that didn't improve were the blisters on his feet. What misery! Calluses developed; that wasn't the problem, but they grew on the bottom, on the side, across. What rotten luck! There was a reason that he had blisters on his feet, like others had eczema.

He looked after himself. Maybe they go together – his feet smelled after a walk. Well, that wouldn't prevent anything.

He would recuperate at marker 13 of the hike, at the edge of a town responding to the name of Mortery. Nothing to point out about Mortery: 150 inhabitants, 98.3% agricultural plots on 8 square miles, which includes the district. Oh! Yes! A beautiful plum orchard which was bordered by a garden at the edge of the road; Bertrand picked some prunes which he wiped on his t-shirt before opening them to check that they didn't have worms. He approached the end of his itinerary. A new blister around his heel was irritating him. He had finished his bottle of lemonade. When the weather report announced that was going to be hot, he carried two gallon and a half bottles for the trip. He really liked lemonade.