

Sébastien Cliche

SURVEILLANCE

PARK

I was sitting on a bench in the middle of the park. From this spot I felt I could take in a maximum amount of information. I watched the passers-by come and go, either by the left-hand path or the right. I could guess by the rhythm of their steps whether they were just idling their time away or crossing the park to reach another point in the city.

Despite the wide range of people entering or exiting the two paths, I noticed certain constants. Patterns began to form, despite myself. It went beyond statistical analysis, revealing an order that preceded the arrival of the pedestrians. Perhaps these models were already in my subconscious, before I arrived at the park. Was it possible that I was superimposing them on a situation that was, at heart, purely random?

I don't know how I got to sleep. At what point did the mathematical models take control of reality and lead me elsewhere, to a lower level of consciousness? Be that as it may, I was woken up by something touching my foot. My eyes opened with a series of rapid blinks. It was another foot touching mine, giving it a few little kicks. Then I heard a voice. I quickly sat up and saw the head connected to the body connected to the foot.

“Move along, move along!” said the mouth of a man wearing a bullet-proof vest. The rest of his face was a blur, or rather impersonal, like a police sketch. I then thought of the face as a set of data assembled by a powerful algorithm that could generate an infinite number of combinations. I heard nothing more, but I saw his mouth opening and closing in a series of different shapes. His eyebrows also moved and his right arm went around in circles. At the end of his other arm was a hand, one finger of which pointed towards the exit of the park.

PACK

The sun is setting. Or to be more exact, the night is falling, as it's been over a week since we've seen it. Our small group stops in a park, where others, like us, have decided to stay the night.

We settle in next to a tree. It's not as if it's going to protect us from anything, but it's a fixed point that convinces us that we're no longer moving. A beacon of immobility. Each of us makes his own little space; few words are exchanged.

I sit down to take a swig of water, but the moment the bottle is out of my bag, I begin to drift off. My eyes close and I slide slowly inward. But this descent is interrupted by erratic survival impulses. My head jerks up and I look around at the group I'm part of. Some are talking in low voices, while others—like me—are just trying to find some quiet.

Who are these people? How did we end up forming this pack? Up to now at least, the power games have been rather discreet. There are a few strong-willed souls here, but no one has yet emerged as the alpha male. This soft hierarchy is quite nice, but it would be naive to think it can last. In any case, it's certainly not me who will demand a role of authority. At best, I can exercise a moral influence, be the one whose sense of justice is admired. I start to reflect upon my moral weight. What would that be exactly? My eyelids grow heavy, tiny curtains that mark the end of the first act.

Another resurfacing. This time, I must have slept a lot longer. The atmosphere in the park is calmer; music is playing, small fires have been lit here and there. Within the pack, everyone seems to be sleeping. I could very easily get up and quietly leave. I could begin by standing up, just to get the others' reaction. Then casually take my bag and leave. Which I decide against. The idea, quite frankly, scares the hell out me. Where would I go? The others may be as disoriented as I am, but in a group you're never totally lost. This time I stretch out and slide, without resistance, into a much deeper sleep.

When I awake I notice something radically different: a stronger, warmer light shooting through the branches. Encouraged, I sit up, but after looking around I realize I'm alone. I jump to my feet, walk round the tree. Nothing. I can't believe it. I begin to dash about the park, peering into the distance for the other groups. Have the members of my clan decided to join another one? My glance keeps returning to the tree, as if they were all going to reappear, as if I hadn't properly seen things the first time.

Little by little, the evidence begins to mount, irrefutably. I think of my reflections of the previous night. No, I'm not the one who's leaving, I'm the one who's been left. Why? It's been over a week since I joined them, and since then two others have joined their ranks. I was therefore not the last to arrive. And yet it seems that they've judged me undesirable or, more pragmatically, useless to the survival of the pack.

Could it be they mistrust me? Who decided that? Did they discuss it, or did it just happen spontaneously? They got up and silently departed, took their bags and left me behind. Because I slept? All these possibilities swirled through my brain, but I was still unable to understand their reasons. Already, the chaos inside me was making me unstable—was it possible that I was being rejected for no apparent reason?

So what now? Is it better to go it alone, or should I try to find another group? I drop to my knees, dazed. I plunge my hand into my bag for my bottle of water. The bag is practically empty. Only some clothes crammed into the bottom. They took the bit of food I was carrying. Resignedly, I concede that when survival is at stake, it's the right thing to do. Probably nothing personal.

I collapse onto the ground, the sun once again veiled by a murky greyness. It becomes clear to me now that I must continue on alone.

STAIRWAY

I rejected right away the idea of going back down by elevator. At the speed everything was collapsing in this city, there was no way I was going to end up in a metal box stuck between the second and third floor of an empty building. I threaded my way to the staircase, which clearly hadn't been cleaned in ages. Despite the darkness, I hurtled down the steps, excited at the idea of getting out of this decaying building. At the bottom, I pushed a door that led to a small hallway. The next door, which led to the street, was locked. Daylight filtered in through the crack at the bottom. I was so close to my objective, but I had no choice but to go back the way I came and take the elevator. My stomach churned when I realized that the first door, the one I had just passed through, was closed—and locked from the inside. I'd been caught in a trap, stupidly, in the hallway of a deserted building. It was by opting for a "safer" exit, ironically, that I put myself in this situation. Over the next few hours I used all my physical and intellectual ingenuity to force open one of the two doors, but in vain. From these ruins, this dilapidated architecture, what remained were very sturdy locks, which once preserved the peace of its occupants. I cursed this obsession with security, both theirs and mine. The days passed and I became increasingly hungry and thirsty. I wore myself out screaming, praying that someone would hear me. I simply couldn't reconcile myself to the absurdity of the situation, and on the fifth day I began to think that someone had laid a trap.

DEPARTURE

I didn't sleep well the night before leaving. I was thinking of everything I had to remember. In my head I made a list of the things I had to bring with me. The list went beyond material things — it also included the names of streets and people, and even some resolutions. Unlike a list written on paper, the list in my head was unstable; certain things were added to it, while others disappeared only to resurface later on. It was an exhausting exercise because I wasn't doing anything concrete. I was lying down while keeping the list in order, without being able to scratch out or circle a single word. And yet I had to sleep, as if the first stage of my journey was to enter a state of unconsciousness, a state in which my vigilance would be at its lowest.

The airport was jammed. New security measures had replaced the old ones, which themselves were only a few months old. I sat on a stool in a fast-food section and watched the travellers. I observed the smallest details, searching for clues about their destinations and reasons for travelling. Those two men over there were certainly on a business trip. The family amidst mounds of luggage were probably visiting relatives — one of their frequent trips back home. And this little girl who was refusing to go any further, dressed in every respect like her mother, was probably taking her very first plane trip.

After a good half-hour of observation, I had not managed to spot any terrorists.

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