

## **Miserrimus**

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### **Synopsis – Part 3 – May 2014**

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Through the windshield, Jade passively watches the great plains of the Beaune region pass by—the pale color of the wheat fields gives off a color lighter than the sky, which is very cloudy in the darkening twilight, lending an eerie accent to the scene. Like huge, pallid mechanical scarecrows, white wind turbines line the road; their pale forms offer the only visible movement in this too ordered landscape, the product of an age of intensive agriculture.

They come to the first highway interchanges and with them industrial and commercial zones—the harsh light emanating from these zones is an aggression piercing the truck's windshield. Next come the first residential buildings, gray, inevitably gray. Soon the entire city passes in front of Jade's eyes: a tangle of lights, vanishing points and bright colors.

Beside her, Soren drives without a word, concentrated, almost tense.

Beneath a roof composed of the highway overpasses is a small, abandoned area, a sort of no-man's land: there is gravel, some mud, a few weeds, thousands of graffiti tags on concrete pillars. Soren parks here—there is just enough room for the truck and the trailer.

Jade looks around; wire fences and the walls of factory buildings decorate a deserted crossroads, insufficiently lit by tired street lights.

Jade doesn't know where to sleep, where to find a hotel... Soren replies that he doesn't know either. He has things to do. At the edge of a fence that borders one side of the area is a small flap which he raises: inside is an electrical outlet and a water tap. He hooks up his truck and the neon "Miserrimus" sign lights up.

Jade asks where the other fairground artists could be. Soren does not answer; he goes into his truck, slams the door and closes the curtains in the cab.

Jade pulls out her recorder and makes a grimace as she pronounces the word

“scarecrow”.

Lying on the analyst's couch inside the “Miserrimus” museum, Jade hears a door slam. She gets up and lifts the heavy purple velvet curtain that hides a small window: the morning is clear and Soren's dark silhouette is moving through the brightness until it disappears completely in the distance.

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Jade remains in the “museum”; she collates the sound notes they've collected over the last few days into a computer.

She goes out. The crossroads is as deserted as before—only a few vehicles pass by rapidly.

She follows one road, then another: many vehicles pass, but no pedestrians. She walks, losing herself in these zones meant for cars, trucks, businesses... Jade begins to feel dizzy—a panic attack, imperious. At the edge of a rather dirty empty lot that borders a four-lane road, Jade crouches down to catch her breath, trying to breathe slowly. A woman of about fifty finds her there, at a point near collapse. The woman speaks to Jade in a language she does not understand, then tries to speak French. She says her name is Stella, “like the stars in America”. She has a thick Eastern European accent. Stella proposes that she take Jade to her home which is near by, so she can rest: staying where she is, alone, is dangerous for a young woman. Jade timidly accepts and stands up with difficulty. Stella helps her walk. The path they take leads them to a shantytown made up of shelters made of cardboard, corrugated metal, recycled sign boards... Stella moves back a wooden planks so they can enter her home: one tiny room completely decorated with photos she's found. She helps Jade to lie down on a mattress covered with floral printed sheets. The young woman falls asleep instantly in this field of brightly colored flowers.

When Jade wakes up it is already evening. Stella's home is deserted; Jade goes outside.

Jade explores the camp in the dusk, moving down the shantytown's street: a series of wooden planks trace the path and offer protection from the mud.

Children in rags run about, sometimes barefoot; women and men gathered around fires or at the entrances to their ramshackle residences look Jade up and down in silence. The misery of these people and the squalor of this place strike Jade: she moves like a robot under their gazes. She takes out her recorder and raises it to her lips, but she cannot articulate a single sound. She remains where she is, motionless, in a state of shock.

Stella's arrival interrupts this moment of suspension; she proposes that they eat something. Jade demurs, but Stella insists. A young, rather heavy set woman named Vanina brings a bowl of soup. Jade smiles to thank her and sits down to take small sips of the soup.

Stella asks Jade what she is doing here, where she comes from... Jade is feeling stronger. She explains that she is conducting a survey on unhappiness. Stella pulls back and Jade realizes she's made a mistake. No, no, she hasn't been sent by the government... She's a fairground artist, she works in an attraction for a fair... Stella is still distrustful and tells Jade quite dryly that there is nothing to say about unhappiness. Or too much: the entire history of the Romani people since the beginning of time would have to be related... Jade offers a flat excuse... Stella, friendly again—circus and fair people are her family—offers to take Jade to the “misery market” tomorrow, the rag collectors' market. There she'll see nothing but unhappy people, she'll be able to take her pick!

That night in the Romani camp, lying on the floor next to Stella, Jade murmurs into her recorder: “rag collectors”, “star”, “flowers”.

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Vanina accompanies Stella, the two of them walk in front of Jade, carrying between them a large plastic bag. When they arrive underneath the filthy pillars that support the highway overpass, Stella signals them to wait. All around, Jade notices dozens of people, alone or in small groups, of all origins—Asians, Africans, Maghrebins, Europeans, Indians—and all ages. They wait; everyone has brought large bags and everyone is poorly dressed.

Jade doesn't understand the signal, but suddenly everyone begins to empty the contents of their bags onto plastic sheeting or blankets, creating little stands.

Stella and Vanina are going to sell some used children's clothes.

Stella signals to Jade to follow her to explore this improvised market. As Stella explains things, Jade discovers that shoes can be sold individually as can expired food products—these can still be consumed two or three weeks after the sell-by date, even meat, according to Stella. And she purchases six yogurts for fifty cents, the sell-by date was only a week ago... A great find. Further on there are broken electrical appliances—if you have several, you can piece them together to get one that works, according to Stella. There are also filthy toys, a few kitchen utensils and huge piles of used cell phones, chargers and all kinds of batteries... These last are all in great demand: these are the stands that do the most business. Jade is very moved by all this misery, it is incredible to her that anyone can sell all these things that are destined for the dump. Stella gently mocks her and tells her she should be satisfied; everyone here is a potential heir to the throne of the most unfortunate... This rag collectors' market is the place where misery is exchanged, passing from hand to hand. People from all over the world come here to escape the misery of their countries—or to bring it with them, it's difficult to tell... But she, Stella, does not complain. She loves France, it was worse in her homeland, especially after she lost her husband, who died from cancer caused by asbestos exposure...

Jade suggests to Stella that she come visit Soren's museum. But Stella refuses: the museum of unhappiness? But she has unhappiness all around her every day, why would she move anywhere else for that?

Jade whispers into her recorder: "sell", "daily", "move", "misery".

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Jade goes back to Soren's truck—it's hardly visible in the mid-afternoon light, masked by the shadows of the highway overpass pillars...

She finds Soren lying on the couch: he's listening to an old fado. He gets up when Jade enters and turns off the music abruptly, as if surprised in an intimate moment.

With a fake indifference, Soren asks Jade where she's been. She tells him about the Romani camp, the rag collectors... They have to go there together, the

"Miserrimus" they're seeking is surely there! Soren raises his shoulders flippantly. Jade accuses him of wallowing in a facile sadness: he stays cloistered in his tiny museum listening to sad songs instead of going out to discover unhappiness where it exists... Soren is indifferent to people, it's inadmissible! Soren defends himself. More and more sure of himself as he speaks, more and more grandiloquent, he affirms that unhappiness is a question of destiny: one mustn't confuse unhappiness with misery. Misery is everywhere, always. It is part of unhappiness, but it is not the acme or the measure of it. What Soren is looking for is the most unhappy, the most unfortunate, not the most miserable; he's not making a catalog, a library of complaints: the whole world wouldn't be large enough to contain them! The most unhappy person may be rich or poor, it doesn't matter. Soren despises pity, which comes from a feeling of superiority. With tears in her eyes, Jade replies that it is precisely these grievances that move her, these infinite, continuous complaints, because they are the expression of life, of human resistance: they are the common lot of humanity! And, if you think of it, Soren's music, his fado, is a complaint, isn't it?... Soren smiles sadly and acquiesces.

He plays the song again, nodding at Jade to listen. The voice is both broken and pure. "Tive Um Coração Perdi-O"... "I had a heart, I lost it", Soren translates...

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In the early morning, Jade watches Soren from the window of the trailer. When he gets out of the truck, she sees he goes in the same direction as he did the day before.

Jade follows him, keeping her distance: a suburban train platform, a station, the subway... There is a crowd and it is not very difficult to follow Soren discreetly. Especially since he walks like a robot and seems completely indifferent to his surroundings.

Once he reaches a bourgeois neighborhood in Paris, Soren sits down on a low wall that looks over a staircase. Jade finds a place on the other side of the street where she can tranquilly observe the scene. Soren waits, immobile. Below them Jade can see a school courtyard, some private gardens and a few flights of steps

that lead down to a small square used as terrace by a restaurant and deserted at this hour of the morning: a waiter is setting up chairs and tables. A bell rings and groups of noisy children come out for recess. Soren reacts to this and watches the agitation: the children play, run and cry out... A teacher walks back and forth in the midst of all this hullabaloo.

Jade observes Soren. She speaks into her recorder: "children", "agitation", "schoolteacher".

Once the recess is over, Soren moves on. He purchases flowers at a place across from a cemetery: a bouquet of purple wisteria. He continues to walk for a bit, goes beyond the cemetery and arrives in front of a large doorway. He goes in, passes in front of the building's concierge, who seems to know him and disappears behind a door. Curious, Jade plucks up her courage and follows him. She walks past the concierge, giving a wide smile and opens the door Soren went through. She carefully goes up the stairs. When she hears footsteps, she hides in a corner: it's Soren, coming back down. He doesn't notice her, and seems completely absent to the world.

Jade continues up the stairs and find the flowers Soren left on the mat in front of a door. She reads the card: "In flores veritas". Beside the doorbell is written the name: Régine Olsen.

Jade is at the florist's; she asks what it means in the language of flowers to offer wisteria. The florist, amazed, realizes that Jade has been following "that strange man". Each year at the same period he comes to the florist's for three days exactly and buys the same bouquet. He's been coming for several years... And so he, the florist, always orders in a surplus of wisteria from his suppliers! In the language of flowers, offering wisteria means one hasn't renounced on a past love, that one holds on to it.

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Jade brings Stella a bouquet of peonies. Stella is very touched—it's been so long since anyone offered her flowers...

Controlling her emotion, Stella tells Jade that she's thought of a candidate for the "most unhappy" person. It's "Skeleton": he's assuredly very unhappy, maybe

even the most unhappy of men. He lives a little further on in another camp, an "official" camp: he has a trailer, he's an old fairground artist—a colleague of Jade, if you will. Stella proposes they go see him right now.

They leave the camp under a light mid-afternoon rain. Jade notices there are huge containers full of trash; young Romanis are sifting through the waste, ordering it by category: metal on one side, glass on another, etc. A garbage truck arrives just then and empties its contents in a noisy fracas. Stella explains that this is totally illegal, but that when dumps are full, here people clandestinely buy trash: sorting through it, you find things you can sell, especially the metal. Jade notes in her recorder: "trash", "fracas".

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The camp is quite organized: a long succession of white trailers lined up along paved ways. Beside the trailers, large German cars are parked, most of them quite old. In the rain, the camp is deserted.

Stella knocks at the door of a trailer. A woman of about fifty, thickset, heavily made up and dressed provocatively, answers the door. She greets Stella and invites them to enter, crying out to "Skeleton" that he has visitors.

Stella and Jade see "Skeleton", who gestures to them to come over to the back seat of the trailer: contrary to what you'd expect, he is a corpulent man, about seventy, maybe older. He greets Jade politely, and kisses Stella warmly. He cries out to his wife to leave them alone. She slams the door behind her after copiously insulting him.

After a moment of silence, "Skeleton" recounts his story with great modesty, humor and an immense pain that is palpable at every instant. Jade records his tale.

Antoine—his given name—was captured by the Nazis along with his whole family during the war. He had just turned twelve. Moved from camp to camp, he was separated from the rest of his family: his parents and two older sisters were sent to Birkenau. He never saw them again and even today, he doesn't know what happened to them: the archives concerning the deportation of gypsies are almost

nonexistent. He learned that Mengele conducted pseudo medical experiments on the Romani by torturing them, but he doesn't know if the members of his family were used as Mengele's guinea pigs. Romani, Sintis, Gypsies: the SS made no difference between them. Antoine was put in the block of Sintis at Buchenwald. Knowing no one, he learned how to "organize" things there, in other words, in the camp lingo, how to get by. Antoine managed to survive through to the end of the war: he spent a year and a half in the camp. After the liberation, nothing was done for the gypsies. And even though he was French, he still had to wander from camp to camp all across Europe before managing to reunite with his uncles and aunts in Brittany: they worked in fairs and offered him shelter and food in exchange for handyman's tasks. As he'd come back from his adventure emaciated, the other adolescents made fun of him and called him "Skeleton"—as Jade can see, this nickname has endured, despite the logic of appearances.

No one around him wanted to hear about his experience in the death camp, nor about the loss of his parents; indeed, he was constantly mocked for his concentration camp experience. Some people called him a little Jew... These denials and mockery increased his pain, especially concerning the loss of his family. For a long time he did not leave... But if you are a Gypsy, it's impossible to leave the community. And people told him that everyone had suffered during the war and that at any rate, that's the way things had been for gypsies since the beginning of time.

He never spoke of it again. But a year ago he was contacted by an association of former deportees. They proposed he return to visit Buchenwald. He accepted, despite the jibes of his wife and children. He asked Stella to accompany him.

Stella nods and continues the account: Antoine recognized almost nothing there, not even where his old block house had been situated. It was the first time she saw him cry. Stella remembers his large frame wandering in the middle of the immense plain, where only the sites of the block houses are visible, looking for his block... Antoine was elsewhere, far away, lost in time and space, panicked, bruised... But the crematorium, the entrance... Antoine adds, he recognized those. When he returned home, the mockery started up again—he would have done better to keep it all to himself and Stella.



Jade looks at him for a long time in silence. She takes his hand in an elan of compassion. Stella affirms that for the Gypsies, individual suffering must be contained—it is a politeness owed to others. And mockery is a means of defense for martyred people in reaction to their unfavorable destiny.

18

It is late in the evening in Soren's museum. Jade collates Antoine's, the "Skeleton's", tale into the computer.

Soren enters the room and she tells him in a few words about "Skeleton", a serious candidate for "Miserrimus"... Soren thanks her: he will listen to her recording. Smiling, Jade informs him that this is the first time he has ever thanked her. Soren doesn't answer; he gets up abruptly and looks in his archives. He suggests they listen to the account of another deportee: "K".

This took place in Gandersheim, a satellite camp to Buchenwald. At the beginning of 1945, Robert Antelme went to Revier (the camp infirmary), to make a visit to a friend who was a teacher, and who he calls "K" in his account. He entered the room and looked for his friend in vain. He asked where "K" was and was directed to a weak man, dying on a bed. He approached and did not recognize him. He spent several minutes minutely observing the man's face: the skull, nose, ears, eyes, mouth... But he recognized nothing. He was frightened, he was frightened of him. And so he moved back to look at the others, whom he recognized. So he was not the problem. He went back to the person who was supposed to be "K" and said a few words, but the man did not respond, had no reaction, his regard remained empty. Robert recognized nothing of his friend. He said goodbye and left the Revier. This disfigurement took a week: exactly one week for "K" to resemble no one.

The man who loses all resemblance is surely the most unhappy of men, Soren affirms. Jade is greatly upset.

Suddenly an electrical short circuit plunges the room into darkness. Soren leaves the trailer. Jade follows him. The weak light of the streetlights barely allows them

to find their way to the flap covering the electrical outlet. Soren lifts it and sees that the water tap has leaked onto the outlet. He turns off the water.

Soren says that they must leave early the next morning: they have to cross France to reach the other fairground artists. Jade would like to say good bye to Stella before they leave and asks Soren if they can leave a little later, mid-morning. And besides, she adds, they have to repair the tap... Soren abruptly answers that she shouldn't worry about the tap and that in any case he will be leaving early tomorrow morning, with or without Jade. It's part of his quest—and Jade's too, since she decided to accompany him—meeting people but not becoming attached, not forming lasting relationships... It's more prudent.

Angrily, Jade asks him: who was the woman who made him like this? Who is Régine Olsen?

Soren, suddenly livid, quickly moves towards his truck and climbs in, leaving Jade alone.

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The plain scintillates with the strong blue light that precedes sunrise. All over the fields, huge combines are cutting through the wheat, progressing rapidly in rows of three, their powerful head lamps violently illuminating the clouds of dust that rise up in the mechanical activity.

A first ray of orange sunlight softens the shadows in the cab of the truck: the faces of Soren and Jade are closed, their eyes are fixed on the empty highway unrolling in front of them.