

## **Miserrimus**

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***Every month: read how the scenario is developing***

### **Synopsis – 1st part-October 2013**

1

JADE, a 35 year old woman, visits the fair. She is alone and smiling. She moves up and down the alleys of the fairground and seems a bit removed from the ambient environment, as if she has placed a filter between herself and the world.

She notices a strange attraction: a dark caravan of cylindrical form; on its side is written "Miserrimus" in neon purple lights.

She enters.

Inside it is like a vaulted cave with a few rays of light piercing through the roof. A soft atmosphere reigns; it is an agreeable place and Jade can hear the sound of flowing water, the sound an underground stream might make.

She is greeted by SOREN, an ageless man—he is somewhere between thirty and fifty, perhaps even older, it's difficult to say. He is very elegant, with airs, rather a dandy. He expresses himself in an elaborate and literate manner, characterized by a discreet, humble and sometimes sad irony; he manipulates paradoxes with energy and jubilation.

Soren explains that he is the inventor of this place, created with the objective of recording the tales of the unhappy destinies of his contemporaries: it is a way of meditating on the unhappiness of the world as well as on his own. Sometimes—more often than one might think—joy, and even jubilation, can be found at the meeting point with unhappy fates—that said without a trace of mockery, on the contrary, with great empathy for the unlucky individual. Misfortune is not always sad, as happiness is not always joyful.

Soren gives Jade a guided visit of his "museum". He shows her a "modern" confessional that he dubs "Sonomaton": a small cubicle where grievances and the narratives of people's misfortunes can be recorded. There is also a large collection of previously registered accounts of unhappy fates and the histories of those who have visited the "Sonomaton". These tapes can be listened to in a peaceful environment. Close by is an authentic psychiatrist's couch in front of a large bookcase filled with books about misfortune—essays, novels, testimonies of all sorts. And finally, Soren shows her a small stage lit by projectors. In the center is a throne. Three small cameras are directed towards the throne and a screen is placed in front of it: it is a small television studio. One can watch news reports, documentaries and fictions on the subject of misfortune.

On the other side of Soren's museum are presentation cases that offer a large selection of "celebrity" magazines. He is particularly proud of this collection: it is a long litany of the real or purported misfortunes of world celebrities!

On a screen is projected a collection of images—paintings, drawings, photographs—that touch on especially unhappy destinies. A computer allows visitors to consult them at will and to access a database with thousands of references.

But the key attraction is in the center of the room: a translucent stele on which the word "Miserrimus" is engraved twice, the words forming a cross. Soren explains that this stele is a stylized reproduction of a tomb in the Worcester Cathedral in England: it gave him the idea for the museum as well as his vocation. It is an empty tomb engraved with the single word "Miserrimus"—which means "the most unhappy" in Latin. Ever since he saw the tomb, Soren has had the idea of finding this most unhappy of men, this "Miserrimus", the rightful occupant of the Worcester sepulcher. He has traveled the world on this quest and came up with the idea of his itinerant museum as a way of meeting candidates who might occupy the symbolic tomb—and also as a way to finance his noble expedition.

Soren gently invites Jade to recount her own story: he knows that no one enters this place purely by chance. She has the choice: Sonomaton, couch or television

studio, whichever she prefers... And in any event, unless she authorizes him to use her name, Soren changes the names of candidates. Jade can also talk about someone else; Soren has noticed that frequently people prefer to speak of other people's misfortunes rather than their own—through modesty or shyness. Because, he adds in a state of elation, to be the most unfortunate is a supreme honor! And in this matter, modesty reigns—on the quest for misfortune, it is not a lesser virtue.

Jade refuses the invitation. She prefers to simply admire Soren's collection. He leaves her alone to do so.

She reads the celebrity magazines with amusement, spends some time in the Sonomaton and exits the cubicle with a hardened face and then opens a few volumes... There is something serious, peaceful and agreeable about this place; she feels good here.

As she prepares to leave, Soren proposes that she listen to a song: we hear the rhythm of Caribbean music: "Ô papa, quel malheur quel grand malheur pour moi...» ("Oh Papa, what misfortune, what great misfortune for me...»). It is *Scandale dans la famille*, performed by the Surfs.

Jade leaves, happy. Outside, in the fairgrounds, she hums the refrain, "Ô papa, quel malheur si maman savait ça... ("Oh Papa, what misfortune if Mama knew...").

2

The next day, in the late afternoon, Jade slips into Soren's museum.

The atmosphere is different: there is an agonizing sort of contemporary music playing. Jade slowly realizes that it is an evocation of unhappiness. Soren is seated in a corner, grumbling, seeming to suffer, overwhelmed. He greets Jade without energy, but pulling himself up, nevertheless. He recites Henri Michaud's poem, of which the music is an expression. "*Le Malheur, mon grand laboureur, Le Malheur, assois-toi, Repose-toi, Reposons-nous un peu, toi et moi*" "*Misfortune, my great laborer, Misfortune, take a seat, rest, let us rest together*

*you and I."*

Jade challenges him": she wants to tell the story of her life to Soren, but not in any of the places he has set up for recording. She proposes that they go outside: an evening stroll in the surrounding countryside might help her to evoke her past...and will do Soren good.

They arrive at the edge of a river. They observe the aquatic plants": the long stalks that undulate in the current and the lights from the fair reflecting on the surface of the water form an aquatic ballet. 'Like an image of destiny', Jade smiles. On the other side of the river is a vast meadow filled with wild plants; they cross over, using a small footbridge.

Seated on the riverbank, Jade speaks of her life. Soren has a small device to record her voice. We can hear the noises of the animals that live here (birds, insects...) and the wind blowing in the vegetation. The lights grow fainter and fainter.

*"Seigneur, je suis très fatigué, je suis né fatigué, et j'ai beaucoup marché depuis le chant du coq."* ("Lord, I am greatly tired, I was born tired, and I have walked far since the cock crowed.")

She remembers this poem, in the form of a prayer"; she learned it at school—it's one of the few she remembers. The verses had immediately spoken to her, marked her, she saw herself in them; they expressed what she confusedly felt—most likely the weight of fate, a fate tinged with indolence and self-irony, a child's fate. The strange fatigue that weighs on this "little black child"—it's the title of the poem—was also hers, it is still hers. Jade has the impression she was born unhappy. The feeling has little to do with melancholy, or the "black humors" so much explored, adulated and even cherished throughout the Romantic 19th century and on into the beginning of the 20th—before the two world wars forever changed the coordinates. It is not a monotone languor, or spleen, or a sense of burden when faced with the inexorable passage of time and the emptiness of existence": her unhappiness is neither sad nor solemn.

No, her unhappiness lies elsewhere, and takes on another form, sufficiently unclear as to sometimes seem unreal, sufficiently insistent to make itself known. Jade speaks of the episodes of fear that have overwhelmed her since childhood, episodes that she cannot control. They happen unexpectedly and are paralyzing, making it difficult to breathe, preventing her from doing anything. Her doctor talks of spasmophilia—but putting words on things doesn't make them go away... In fact, in this case it makes them worse. And these episodes may also be the expression of something else.

Jade is sure that these crises are a sort of purge: as if the diffuse unhappiness inside her comes out at these times, as if her body needed to purge itself at regular intervals.

Jade would like to live simply, crossing through life with as few shocks as possible, without any great 'project' either: just to be... not really happy... but at peace. To purge herself once and for all.

Because Jade does have "small happinesses": placing her bare feet on the cold marble floor of the living room, feeling drops of fine rain on her face, the wind blowing in her hair and under her dress, filling her lungs with that air... It is also good to direct the shower head towards her chest and to feel the intense heat running down her body...

Jade writes texts for correspondence sales catalogs. She is the person who writes: "woman's cable knit sweater with plunging neckline, exists in five colors", etc. It is undemanding work that she can do from home: with her spasms she is not able to work in a group.

Night has fallen. Soren and Jade return in silence to the fairgrounds, guided by its lights and sounds.

At the entrance to his attraction, Soren tells Jade that she must not turn her back on unhappiness, or try to escape it. On the contrary she must face it and cross through it. "Happiness is not the opposite of unhappiness, it is the heart of

it.”

Without pronouncing another word, he goes into his museum and closes the door.

The neon “Miserrimus” clicks off, leaving Jade in obscurity—only a thin dribble of light from the fair exposes the contours of shadows.

3

The fairgrounds: the day has barely begun, but the fairground artists are already packing their things, closing their attractions, hooking up their caravans: they're leaving.

Soren is at the wheel of his little truck—a sort of home-made mobile home—trailing his museum/caravan. At the stop sign at the edge of the square he sees Jade, who is holding a small suitcase. Without a word, not even saying hello to Soren, she opens the passenger's side door and climbs in. “Let's go” she says. Soren, uncomfortable, starts the engine.

The monotone landscape of the great plains is lit by the pale rays of the autumn sun. A stormy discussion ensues.

Soren says that Jade cannot go with him and that she will have to get out at the next town. He lives alone, solitude is necessary for his well-being. And...Jade is a woman. He fears the company of women inordinately.

Jade replies that she is not forcing herself on him. She will sleep at a hotel in all the towns where they stop—she has money saved and she can also continue to work writing texts for sales catalogs. She is convinced that the Miserrimus museum needs a second person. And, precisely, a feminine presence. Many aspects of unhappiness are inaccessible to men.

Soren struggles with himself. He seems panicked.

But Jade holds out. She challenges him and says that she is only following his indications: to cross through unhappiness and not turn her back on it. And that is

what Soren is doing, isn't it? And so they will be two now, searching for this "Miserrimus"... Who is certainly a woman.

The route slips past in silence.

## Synopsis – 2nd part – February 2014

4

The industrial and commercial zone of a small provincial city awakes to the pale straw yellow light of morning sun: garbage trucks slow down the traffic of delivery trucks, tractors pulling loads begin their parking lot ballet, waking the occupants of the cars and trucks that parked there overnight; in the stores, the cleaning and maintenance staff and surveillance teams—guard dog handlers, controllers, guards—move into place; travelers' cars leave the cheap hotels, crossing paths on the highway interchange with the vehicles of the first employees.

In one of these low cost hotel rooms, Jade looks out of a small window, observing the overtures to diurnal activity. Holding a small recording device in her hand, she briefly describes certain aspects of the scene, using isolated words and distinctly separating each syllable: “ballet” - “straw” - “residence” - “load” - “gravel” - “garbage”...

Jade has breakfast in the cafeteria: under the yellowish neon lights, the small, narrow room is deserted; flat screens are attached to all the walls, diffusing in a loop the programs of a news channel, composed of choppy, nervous and enervating sounds. Jade speaks with CATHERINE, a woman of forty, a hotel employee and the only person who lives here. We cannot hear their exchange, the noise of the television monitors is too loud.

Jade walks through the parking lots on foot, crossing paths with the day's first clients as she slaloms between cars and trailers. She climbs up a small hillock and sees that on the other side and downhill, the fairground workers are setting up their attractions: carousels, shooting galleries, haunted house, etc. She finds the metal “Miserrimus” caravan—the neon light is off and the door shut. She



knocks in vain. She moves toward Soren's truck, which is parked close by and knocks on the back door, but there is no response.

Jade talks to the other fairground people, but no one knows where Soren might be—his disappearances, especially at night, are frequent and do not worry anyone.

5

Jade spends the morning in the large shopping mall which is composed of a hypermarket and a multitude of furniture, clothing and home supplies stores... The reduced activity of these places at these hours of the day underlines their outmoded and rather sad character: the bright colors of their signs and lights seem to Jade to be "forced": she notes the word on her little recording device. We see her conversing with the people she meets, employees, guards, clients. She holds out the recorder to them, smiling broadly. She presents herself saying she is preparing a survey on unhappiness. Some of her interlocutors shrug their shoulders, others find the subject amusing. A few sentences on unhappiness are proffered. People shrug their shoulders or take fatalistic poses—one woman takes offense and retorts that we should be worrying about happiness, since everyone already knows what unhappiness is...

Jade begins a conversation with a guard, SANSAN, a former clandestine worker from Burkina Faso. But another guard quickly interrupts the exchange; he asks Jade to follow him to meet the security chief for the center, threatening Sansan as he does so. In this place, with its walls covered with dozens of monitors linked to surveillance cameras that film the shopping center, the head of security asks Jade, *manu militari*, to give him her recording device. She obstinately refuses and will not speak to him, despite all his threats. Tired of this, he encourages her to leave: the shopping mall is a private space and no one there wants anything to do with an albatross of misfortune, like Jade. He sentenciously adds, proud of his quip, that here, the clients' satisfaction generates employment and thus the happiness of an entire society.

6

At the beginning of the afternoon, Jade returns to the fairgrounds. The neon "Miserrimus" sign is still off and the trailer closed. Jade inspects things more closely than on her previous visit, she circles the caravan, examines and looks under it... Under the doorstep she finds the spare key.

Jade has hardly turned on the museum's lights when she hears someone knocking on the door: it's Catherine, the hotel employee. Jade welcomes her warmly and proposes a brief guided tour of the place.

Catherine is particularly moved by the translucent stele, which she finds beautiful and dignified; timidly, she announces that she also knows a "Miserrimus", someone who deserves such a stele. She is ready to tell the story—she's a bit frightened, but she thinks it could soothe her, do her good: there is something about Jade's face that inspires confidence in Catherine. Jade indicates the "Sonomaton", the couch or the small television studio... But Catherine would like something simpler: just an interview, to talk, with Jade facing her. They decide to both sit on the couch; Jade places the recording device in front of Catherine.

7

Catherine speaks softly, her voice trembles a little, but she expresses herself in beautiful, almost literary French... She begins by speaking of her childhood terrors, when her father placed tools—hammers, screw drivers, clamps—on the dinner table. She remembers a hard man, very severe and menacing, with great bursts of anger... It is this "ghost"—her father died when she was 11—who could be a "Miserrimus"... She understands this, now that she has studied his life in great detail, seeing how unhappy his destiny was.

Catherine recounts her investigation: it was necessary for her, in order to "mourn". And so, bit by bit, from memories to deductions, she painted the portrait of a complex, secret, poetic and violent man...

An FLN (Algerian National Liberation Front) agent during the Algerian war, her

father, Mohamed Tahar, was the victim of torture. The son of landowners, he came to France in the middle of the war, most probably to hide. He remained in contact with the FLN, although it was not clear if he did so freely or under constraint. Especially, and of this Catherine is almost completely sure, he became a torturer himself, either in Algeria, which could explain his departure, or once he arrived in France. Married and with three children in France, he also had another family who remained on the other side of the Mediterranean—another wife and two children. Neither of the families knew of the other's existence. And so he had two identities, two birth dates. A ghost amongst the living, he committed suicide by jumping out of the window of his home in July, 1978.

In a spontaneous movement, Jade takes Catherine in her arms.

Jade and Catherine jump when the voice of Soren breaks the silence. He has appeared as if by magic. Catherine gets up, gathers her things and leaves without saying a word, but exchanges a tender look with Jade.

Visibly tired, Soren sinks onto the couch and asks Jade to leave him alone. Jade moves the recording device close to her mouth and, watching Soren all the while, articulates: "ghost", "torture", "double", "extenuated".

8

When Jade returns in the late afternoon, Soren's caravan is open to the public. Inside, Soren is in animated conversation with a group of adolescents, who are dazzled by his rich collection of reproductions of "vanities". The bravura of these young people is obvious, faced with these images of skulls, which both amuse and impress them at the same time. Soren is in high form and seems to be amusing himself with them, increasing their unease. "These skulls are my only real friends, they're my family, they're the same as me" he grandiloquently claims.

When the adolescents leave, thrilled by their visit, Jade and Soren find themselves alone. They stare at each other a moment. Jade takes out her recorder and notes "the same". Soren tells her that she can't understand: "no

woman could"... And, she will have to leave him and let him continue his quest alone.

"What is her name?" Jade suddenly asks. Soren pretends not to understand. Jade continues: "What is the name of the woman who has made you suffer so?" Soren looks at Jade for a long moment in silence. Then he searches for a large black and white photograph and shows it to her: it is the picture of an old African woman, very thin and with incredibly wrinkled features. "Lo'Ono", Soren presents her. He met the woman in Uganda.

Soren tells his tale, becoming more and more lyrical and impassioned: Lo'Ono was a member of the Iks, a tribe that was uprooted by the Ugandan government in order to build a reserve. A famine resulted and the Iks lost all benchmarks and social proprieties: fathers stole from sons, sons from brothers, etc... In this difficult society, with no concessions, people died alone—sometimes assassinated by members of their own family. Cases of cannibalism and incest were reported. Without it being reciprocal, Soren became quite close to old Lolim, the tribe's sorcerer of impotent powers and his wife Lo'Ono, a blind woman growing steadily weaker each day. One day the old woman fell into a ravine, to the jibes of the children and adults who witnessed the scene. Lo'Ono was also laughing at what happened to her. Some people hit her, thereby increasing her agony, but still she laughed. Noticing the agitation, Soren ran to the scene; he became angry with the people who mocked the old woman and took Lo'Ono in his arms, to soothe her suffering. Lo'Ono begged him to leave her alone; when he refused, she began to cry. Gathering her last strength, she told him, "Because of you I am going to die remembering there was a time when people helped each other, when they were kind and good. You have made me the most unhappy person who ever existed on earth." Lo'Ono died the next day and Soren's care could not alleviate her suffering.

Soren is standing now, exultant. "Misfortune is an affair of destiny, not suffering!" He adds, "Mine is cursed... And joyous!" He leaves the room as one leaves a stage, taking a bow, and leaving Jade to her interrogations.

Almost simultaneously—Soren nearly bumps into him—a tall thin man with metal-framed glasses enters; he is smiling and affable. He presents himself to Jade: Professor CASEY, the director of the “Edward Murphy” multidisciplinary center for scientific study, named for the great inventor of the law of the same name. Jade asks the man to come back later, the museum is about to close. But Casey insists; his work will be highly interesting to the people who have created this noble enterprise, the quest for “Miserrimus”! The scientific method is necessary to conduct this research—the luminous rays of science will surely enlighten the people who have instigated the search for the most unhappy of men! Casey gives Jade a card: she must come to see him in his center for modern research. Jade asks him what he specializes in. He answers solemnly: “Shitology”... The study of shit happening, personal catastrophes, the law of series and the famous Murphy's law which stipulates that, between two options, it is always the worst which comes to pass. Jade can't help but laugh... “Shitology”?! He laughs with her: Shitology is a joyous science, daughter of all sciences! The 19th century witnessed the triumph of the physical sciences, the 20th that of human sciences, Shitology, which reunites them, will come to reign in the 21st century!

Night has fallen in the industrial and commercial zone. At the window, Jade observes the purplish neons that dispense their striated light in these obscure spaces, here and there creating glints on the metallic surfaces of vehicles parked there for the night. She notices the hampered movements of their occupants, as they try to find sleep. In the background, on the exit ramp, a private surveillance company car speeds past...

Jade softly and clearly speaks into her recording device: “shit”, “science”, “neon”, “cursed”, “joyous”, “striated”...

***To be continued...***