I’m not sure where to start. Maybe at the beginning. The beginning, I think, was the day I got my ass kicked, and then I was taken to the station. It wasn’t the first time it happened to me, of course. But it had been a while since I had been caught. And this time, it was different. First, because it was the day Jack took interest in me. Second, it wasn't simply graffiti. It was a commission. This arrest was going to screw up my business. I’d found myself getting paid to vandalize blinds or whatever. Some guys, contractors, were spreading the word. They’d contact me and ask me to go and break down the blinds of the competition—his car, his house. It was all by word of mouth. The last customer couldn’t help but tell the next one his story. It must have made them laugh. It must have turned them on to death, in fact. It was completely illegal and unfair. It was raw cowardice. That’s what they liked about it.

So, I met one of these gentlemen. We had coffee. He gave me a Google location with the picture and everything. I would ask if there was a specific date for the operation. Often, there was: the guy made sure I did my operation the day before vacations or at Christmas, just to properly spoil the other one and ensure that the owner wasn't present. Anyway, I was always hatching the plan a little in advance. Some people would ask me to write specific messages, threatening stuff, but I would either avoid it or charge more. Most of the time, I would just tag randomly. Or I would make up some kind of gang war that happened during the night, one city against another, and even fachos and gauchos fighting in the poor shopkeeper’s front. I had a knack for storytelling. I was into the flowing, the uncontrolled with different writings, a bomb in each hand to imitate the writing of a third party and to go faster.

I always had trouble motivating myself to go out in the middle of the night, and eventually it filled me with a childish satisfaction when I was done. Always.

I proposed stupid slogans like "We'll come back," "I love your wife," and "I'll have your skin, my bastard!" for the threats, all in an assassine, spidery, psychotic style with difficult-to-appreciate colors, irritating pigments, dark and shrill at the same time, and other of the most beautiful effects. I forbade myself racial insults, of course.

I had charged two hundred euros for my first mandated act of vandalism. Very quickly, I went up to five hundred, eight hundred, and sometimes a thousand or two. Not more... It was the best job in the world. I went out three times a month at most, and that was enough to make a salary. Once the order was done, I showed the pictures. The guys were thrilled. They were interested in me, and they paid me for my work. They ordered paintings for their homes. To get closer, they mimicked my suburban accent; friendly mimicry. In return, I borrowed the character of a mute bad boy. It allowed me to put a little distance between myself and them, and they must have liked that. It was their romantic vision of the banlieue. My success was assured by the rarity of the service. I was, and still am, the only oddball who was a self-proclaimed professional vandal; in short, counter-street marketing.

The idea did not come from me. I was making decorations for the tradesmen's store blinds. I would paint their logos on their storefronts, as well as scenes and graffiti that were a little kitschy on the signs that drew customers in. It put butter in the spinach, and it paid for my painting. I went to do the front of this guy who had a driver’s license point recovery business. I finished his ugly blind there and found my gold mine. The guy had trouble paying me. Maybe he thought it was ugly too, what I had done. But his polluted blindness was not a great support either. Now he tells me that he is the most unhappy man in the world, that life is unkind to his kind, that he can't sleep, that he wants to retaliate against his former partners who have abandoned him—«They left with my clientele and my ideas»—and all that nonsense. I’m supposed to understand him. I’m supposed to bail him out.

How much for tags?

-Two hundred.

Okay, but you’re getting it everywhere, right? I want it to be gross. Don’t forget the windows on the sides and everything.

Yeah, no problem. I can even throw acid on his windows, so he has to change them. It’s expensive. - Yes, that’s right.

The guy, when I showed him the pictures, said it was the best day of his life. I felt like I was his Zorro. Anyway, he started talking to me after that. He relaxed. He was talking to me about art and literature. He had culture, in fact, and I would say taste. He gave me two tickets for the art fair at the Carreaux du Temple. A gift. And with that, he told me to stick around; he wanted to commission a painting for his wife. I said to myself, "There is good business. The lowest human feeling is the only inexhaustible resource; that’s the key to neo-liberalism.

For those who wanted to declare the pay, I would charge them a silkscreen print as a work of art that would then be deducted from their taxes. The system was well established. It was too good to continue. Maybe I wasn’t worrying enough. I was taking it lightly and wasn’t specifically organized. I started to stress out only when I got out. Investigations seemed difficult because I was always signing different names in different styles. It would all be drowned out by the Parisian vandalism.

I never really knew why I got caught. I guess the owner forgot his keys or something; a neighbor told him, and he was not far away. It happens. But I had been waiting. I was waiting in my 206, dabbling in the smell of fake leather and cold cigarettes. I dozed off. I dreamed I was at the beach on an island with a beautiful woman and a guy.

signs. It was like a flash. To the left of the blind was a CCTV camera. I covered my face with a plaid scarf, a gift from my mother. I put my phone in the car. I slid the car keys over the rim. I don’t like to have my car keys without my car, but when you’re getting squeezed, it’s better to say you’re on foot. I’d pull up one leg of my jog to serve up a bit of the shot they’d expect, the ones who’d watch the camera tape later. Hood. I’d put on my headphones. The truth is, I get stressed when I paint. So I’d rather give myself a time limit and listen to music than threaten my concentration with every passing car. If the cops happen to drive by, I consider it bad luck and just deal with it. There’s often no point in running or doing anything. But you have to give yourself a very strict time limit, run headlong, and then run again. I keep stats. I start the stopwatch. It’s a lot of fun.

That’s why I didn’t hear them coming. I was doing abstract doodles with Stress in my ears to give me like an adrenaline shot. It was really just destruction. I was marking PSGs and OMs that were getting in each other’s way to look pretty. The sound of a click, a shadow in the corner of my eye, a fresh wind, and Pam! The nuisiers' handcuffs were pushing my earphone into my eardrum and crushing my cheekbone. My ear was digging deeper into my skull. My cranium crossed the space in an elegant arc and hit the asphalt, which was not going anywhere. The impact was violent. I felt it strongly.

On the floor, I was taking out one earphone. The other was grabbing my collar. Two pieces of information were hitting my brain before his series of fists. My grandmother melted her gold teeth and pulled out that chain I’d been wearing since I was eighteen. I felt she had cracked. There was no way I was going to lose it. It had to be slipping somewhere in my shirt. Then the bastard had to touch the music. He inadvertently changed it to "funk. Labi Siffre, to be exact.

That was it. He would call me names like "Huh, you little son of a bitch," and I would say "Fuck your mother" in thin air. The guy was so excited that he went to get his scooter. I watched him roll the scooter chain around his fist as I retrieved my gold chain and slipped it into my pocket, only to be held at gunpoint by his hands on my wrists and his knees on my muffled thorax.

It was perhaps the only time in my life that I was happy to have my face imprinted with the blue rhythm of the arriving cops. It stopped the beating. Otherwise, the face... Gone...

I got picked up. With the cops, you have to be cool when the team arrests you and super annoying when you’ve passed the comic book doors. I used to do the opposite. It didn’t work at all. They think you’re a nice guy, so you’re naive, so you’re impressionable, so you get twice the price when you’re arrested. That’s the chicken’s motor; they play with the weak and crush any kind of threat... Just like real chickens... In this case, they were nice, so I wasn’t overdoing it. My head was sufficiently swollen that they didn’t want to overdo it. We went to the hospital for a quick check-up and a dressing before going to the deposition.

The first form, I filled it out handcuffed to the radiator, next to two guys who had decided to play the most annoying guys in the world. They understood the game.

«- Your name, surname, birthdate, address,...» says the cop.

Dominique Lefèvre,...

"Dominique, I’ll fuck you," says one of the guys. -Ahaaah. That’s the first time I’ve heard that one. - I’m just kidding, don’t cry, ech’. What are you here for? Are you shitting yourself or what? What time is it? Hey, what time is it? I spit on you, you little bitch. Answer me! We’ll wait for you at the exit tomorrow. We’re going to fuck you up even more than you already did, whore. That you’re a whore...

The cop finally deigned to take me to the drunk tank. Before that, they made me go through the toilet so that I would show my bullet hole, saying that I could have hidden a naked weapon or maybe some dignity. The drunk tank is always a sordid place. It looks like solitary confinement. That’s to give you a taste. There was a dim light. The frosted windows showed nothing. The prickly blanket held back the ten sheaves of bums that made it a real G.A.V. blanket. With my shoelaces confiscated, I still had a hood and arms to cross to get some sleep. I was thinking about the movie I had started at home and was still running. I had to get home as soon as possible. A cop would come by to wake me up every time he saw me wobble. He would come by and tell me to stay ready for the deposition, which would come much later, of course. So I would play games. I would tell myself stories to pass the time. Man is still an animal, isn’t he? Lock him up, and his whole body oozes wet fox. You had to do your best not to go crazy.

Finally, I passed for the deposition. It must have been five o’clock. Maybe six. I was purposely screwing up my fingerprinting to save time and provide my pupils with the maximum amount of stimulus.

A second cop asked me if I wanted to give my DNA to facilitate my registration. A second cop asked me if I would give my DNA to make it easier for me to be registered. So, no. I don’t want to. When I refused, he explained with notorious subtlety that it was a scientific process that left no room for error. I continued to refuse.

Then, it is necessary to start a legal procedure to...

Yeah, yeah, I get it. Okay. Let’s go.

We scratched the inside of my mouth, and I moved to the typewriter—well, the computer and the commissioner that goes with it. We rehearsed the sequence of actions as if it were a play, to see if I had any holes in my text, problems with my ellipses, or mouse holes for him to play cat. We began the session with a briefing on the context and the plot.

«-Hello artist! So... We looked at your file. It’s... I didn’t tell you to sit down! ... Sit down. Okay. It was more beautiful what you were doing before, there. What happened? What’s the project here with the doodles? Are you more PSG or OM? We didn’t get the message. Still an art student?

-No. I’m working now.

-Aaah. Well, you see! You are a champion! You missed your studies by playing the scum. Serves you right. I’m going to do everything I can to get the D.A. to kick your ass. I’m going to get you for drunken brawling in a public place and contempt of court. all of it! Just sign the damn rag and get out.

I was pretty sure that the judge or mediator wouldn’t be that hard. It was just a matter of not letting him know that it was mercenary work. As for the rest, the proprio had little chance of pressing charges without me pressing charges in return for assault and battery—not to mention all the procedural flaws that I could have slipped in on the day of the interview.

The commissioner stepped forward and said, "Hey. By the way, the owner is an old friend of ours. Oops. Ahahah». I winced, "Merde!"

They kept me awake by promising me breakfast—small butter cakes I never saw coming. I went out under the inexhaustible philosophies of the couil-lon, lieutenant A. D. N. around noon.

«-You’ll know to stay home and watch TV again.» He summed it up. When you don’t work, you have to stay home, watch TV, and drink if that’s not enough. But that’s it. These are the limits of freedom. Only freedom under control is allowed. Freedom has a place and a time. I was dreaming of a shower to wash away the sticky smell of the garlic. The idea of going to get the car knocked me out. My wounds were reawakening. I thought about the threats of the two jokers from the day before because a guy was looking at me from the opposite sidewalk. Maybe I was paranoid, with all the mental fatigue that was overwhelming me. Maybe not. I thought they had something else to do, though. I was going to the left when he came towards me. I thought he was giving me a friendly wave.

«-Wait.»

The tall blond guy with the perfect hair approached. He probably wanted to confront the freshness of his multiple shampoos, softeners, and other aftershaves with the stench of my soul. I wonder if the bad smells are stronger than the good ones or if it’s the other way around. Maybe they mix or slide together like water and oil.

"It’s you, Domi, isn’t it?"

That was my graffiti blaze. Dominique or Domi, simply. It was funny because it was ridiculous for a guy my age. I always liked nice, simple blazes for graffiti artists, like Kikil or Mr. Bibi. This name came from my great uncle, a funny bird if there ever was one. Dominique D'Hôtel, foundling in front of a hotel in the Saint-Ouen flea market He committed a murder at the age of twelve. He explained that he could not stand rum. It made him nervous. A protective brother took the rap for him. He turned himself in for him, but the judge, not serene, sent him to juvenile detention anyway, behind the high walls. It kept him away from the gambling and the bento, but not from the rum. When he came of age, they drafted him for the bat’d’af’. He came back from the merry-go-round loaded with tattoos. Child of Misfortune, engraved on his chest, was the first piece of a set that told his life story. The uncle was called Dodo the Tattooed when he came back from the second war and started a career of theft and front-wheel drive pimping and of course much more.

After my first arrest, I reversed the letters. I switched to Modi. I had taken a stepsion for Modigliani, the perfect cursed artist of Paris Montmartre. What could be more romantic? I admired his alcoholic shadow hovering over his resolutely mystical paintings. His cariatids appropriated the primitive arts in a complicated opening onto a new and ancient world, with one eye observing reality and the other turned inward to better reflect it. It took us out of our colonialist culture. Modigliani, the unbearable heaviness of the genius who sacrifices himself for the advancement of his society His sensitivity was his cross.

"Curse"​ is a powerful word. It evokes witches, vampires, mummies, and all the monsters on the fringe of the Christian world. All it takes is one verb badly said in a language that forks so that the fate is thrown, as in life, where the destinies are worked out of the thrown words. The future of Oedipus, played out long before his birth, is but an echo of all our lives. Just like monsters, snakes, scapegoats, the cursed heroes that we are must accept their destinies or it is the society of Thebes, our whole society that spoils. I mean, from the first word, it’s crazy to see all the tragedies that get tangled and untangled with the good and bad words spoken at a given moment. Modigliani understood something about the cursed hero's relationship with the past and future of a half-finished life, and the impact on his people, trapped in a cycle, a cycle for each of us and a cycle for everyone. The stories always repeat themselves. Is it to give someone the opportunity to find the right words at the right time? In my quest for the graffiti experience, I wrote these spoken words over and over on the walls.

I refused the outstretched hand.

«-Hello. My name is Jack. from Jack and Amer. Can I buy you a coffee?

I wondered if I was hallucinating. Jack and Amer were the most famous guys in the area when I started graffiti, but after that, we didn’t talk about them anymore.

«-Eh... No. As you can see, you’re picking me up at the wrong time. I’ve got a lot of stuff to do. I’m gonna

Start by getting some rest. I didn’t sleep very well, you know? Have we met before? What the hell are you doing here anyway? Are you from the police? (I knew a graffiti artist who became a Ratp controller, so you never know.)

I know it might seem strange for me to approach you now like this... You tagged a friend’s blind last night. He told me about it so I could find you.

- Yeah. Your cop buddy Great. So what do we do? You gonna fix my face, too?»

He raised his eyebrows like the guy who means you no harm, and with one hand raised like Buddha on his best day, I was the opposite. I was trying to put on airs, but I could feel that it wasn’t scary at all. I must have had one percent of my energy available in my body, and he was two heads taller than me, which is common. I’m short, so most people on this earth are two heads taller than me.

«-No, listen. I don’t really care about your blindness. I can handle that business, for that matter; it’s not a problem. I’m here as a headhunter on my own behalf. I’d like you to work for us.

How do you know who I am? And how did you find me? And why are you recruiting right out of the gardav’?»

My suspicion seemed to relax and even amuse him. «- I looked at the surveillance footage. We couldn’t see you, and anyway, I don’t know your face. But you’re the only graffiti artist in the area with a reputation for being ambidextrous. It’s true that I had made little videos where you could see me doing my outlines with both hands. I found this technique to go faster, and it was pretty choreographed, so I asked a buddy to come and film me in action. It only got about a hundred views on YouTube. I didn’t think it was enough to make a name for myself. And at the same time, life in the neighborhood is small.

«-I’m not really ambidextrous, I said.

I went to the surrounding police stations, asking for my nephew, who had been caught for vandalism during the night. Here, they told me I had to wait outside for your release. And here I am.

Cops don’t really care about procedures.

Since I was slow on the uptake, he went on: "Here’s my card. Call me later when you’re rested. We’re a small communications agency. We’re hiring graffiti artists. Promise me you’ll come in for an interview. If you do, I’ll fix your story from last night. I simply asked my friend not to press charges or try to find you. Does that work? I slipped the card into my pocket and walked away. I wanted to say goodbye but said, "We’ll see. The sun was irritating me, and I still didn’t know how to take this guy’s unexpected intervention.

I could have killed like the other one there, in the Stranger. The stench makes you hot and crazy. But animals don’t wash themselves, and they don’t kill for anything. Who knows why we humans can’t stand it?

I retrieved my car, which had already had time to get a ticket, and drove vaguely home to end the torture of that shitty night. I was happy to see my apartment again. I got my shower as a fountain of ambroy. I slept to complete my baptism and ate in front of the TV to regain the holy innocence that belongs to every man. Hallelujah. A t first I wanted to burn my clothes because they stank so much, but I gave them a second chance. I bought the jeans not even six months ago. In his back pocket, there was the card. White, eight centimeters by five five, a cheap pa- pier, no more than a hundred grams and letters scattered on it, no name, no other info. It was probably a game. I’d seen these before, the mystery cards. A friend, a graphic designer, had put his phone number on his card so that when they were linked together, they formed the last number. He stopped because no one would call him. This one was similar. Graffiti artists like to play games. It’s a known fact. The card had scattered letters.

Jack and Amer were of that generation where blazes were American-oriented, so they were four years above me, I would say. Those two made a quick breakthrough. I was a fan. They were posing enormously. They attacked through the Saint Lazare lanes. At a time when everyone was painting with chrome and black spray paint, they were rolling their backgrounds in color. Roller paint has good coverage. The walls of the Saint-Laz line are often quite wet and absorb graffiti quickly. Today, you can still see their pieces as if they were done the day before. They were the first to use one shade in a can of white paint. They'd go over the outlines with the same color, but often a darker shade, tone on tone. More rarely, they combined classics such as a white background with a red outline, a black background with a white outline, or a yellow background with a black outline. They systematically put their names together. Only once or twice did I see their names separated. They had adopted a common style—very typographic and very impactful. The 3Ds were always on the bottom right of the overlay, with the two names separated by a logo. The first series had the letter H, which was the logo of Jack Hammer, a Marvel Comics supervillain. The character appeared in Dare Devil for the first time anyway. He could break walls with his jackhammer gloves. quite a story. So the H was the name of their crew. It was a reference to Jack Hammer’s gang, The Hydra. The Hydra was a secret society of villains in the comics; the classic laboratory of Nazi scientists who created monsters to annoy the Americans. Hydra’s symbol is, of course, the Hydra from Greek mythology.

«Cut off the head of the hydra and a second one will grow» was the motto of these fictional terrorists. It was perfect. The H connected the duo as if they were from the same body. After that, all they had to do was stick stickers on the letter, and everyone knew it was them. Classy. Efficient. Sometimes they allowed themselves a few variations. When they made trains, for example, I once saw a huge dark green jungle-like block with a fluorescent green outline on a black background and white light. As a central logo, there was an overdone hydra. The A of Amer had two dots like Ä, to refer to the Ministry Ä. M. E. R., I think, their 95200 album cover.

Another session, I discovered pink lettering with a description of a sexual position in the middle. The woman was squatting on the man’s dick. This is a position called Jackhammer in Anglo-Saxon. Once, a pair of letters separated their names, but I did not understand if there was a reference or not. Anyway, in a time before social networks, the two Lascars had a strong impact on the local teenagers, of which I was part, mainly for the style they offered. Then they disappeared. It doesn’t surprise me that they fired my shite's communication designer in the end. It’s funny. All through my adolescence, I imagined a gang with black hoods and ghosts that looked like urban legends. In the end, Jack was a tall, blond guy with a nice look. That’s what graffiti is: a board game with shifting rules and Venetian masks. I wondered what Amer might look like.

I was curious. I thought about it as I went to get my money for the last job. I was going to have to quit for a while. The guy who had just paid me saw my swollen head. He knew right away. He knew I’d paid for his kick-ass blind. He thought of karma. I saw it. The real karma was that I had no more money coming in. Later that week, I stopped by to see my parents. I claimed to have been picked on in the street by a bunch of thugs, but I could tell they didn’t believe me. I was too old to be picked on. They were too old to shoot the piano player. So everything was fine. I had some cake and everything and went back to the house, determined to decipher the card.

It was the most boring business card I’ve ever seen. The typeface had a mechanical, World War II vibe. Assuming his taste for secret societies, I went for cryptology. I hate it. I don’t have a logical mind. I had to get into it. The world today is a world of code. I started quietly with the classics and the atmosphere of the Q. I.

I looked for regularity, a rhythm. I started with the classics of cryptography, like Caesar’s Cipher (A-D, B-E). I made groups of letters to find words like Borel’s theorem. Then, I went to the next level with the Cardan grid, the Morse alphabet, the directory systems... I served myself a whisky and coke (that’s not a code. I did, in fact, serve myself a whisky). I tested the Vigenère table... There was nothing to do. I’m bad with code, even if I don’t like it. I can’t do an Enigma or something like that. What the hell, should only Einstein be able to contact this guy? It can’t be that complicated.

I looked at the map, dumbfounded as a toad is by the moon. Perhaps phosphorescent ink? After all, he was a painter. I turned off the light. Nothing. Then, as I stared at the group of i’s, I thought something was going on with them. That’s when it hit me. There was an H in the middle, with a little imagination, of course. The first letters that stood out were C, I, I, C. After a few erasures, I caught the key: C = 0. So I=6. The beginning was 0660, which was a phone number. The rest followed the pattern of the H. The last numbers were a return to the first ones to confirm the combination. Easy.

All you had to do was call to be sure. It was just past one in the morning. I felt like I was cramming for an exam. I had to know if I was right. I dialed the numbers. I said, "Hello." Then I hung up. It was the same voice.