

## Christopher-Benjamin

Sometimes I still wonder if I really chose Christopher-Benjamin or if it was he who chose me. It was the year of all the disappointments, long after the mega tsunami and the torrential rains that followed. It was hard to know exactly when. Practically no more good reasons remained to keep track.

It's true. No one should have survived that. But what could we have done about it? People hang on. One cannot even be mad at them. They want to keep on walking beneath the sun, even when it is absent, forgotten. They keep doing it. It is legitimate.

That day, I fished up Christopher-Benjamin in front of Building A, just before nightfall. When I think about it again – and that is the least I can do – I think to myself that I almost missed seeing him. Christopher-Benjamin was drifting on a makeshift raft probably hastily constructed during the last flood.

At first, I thought he was dead. I then tried to catch the leather bag he was carrying on his shoulder. He had probably been awakened when the pole I was holding out touched him. I'd hope to snag his leather bag. But then he turned over and shot me a black look of ingratitude and contempt which has become so familiar to me over the years. That was how, fiddling the old man's bag with my pole, I came to know he was not fully dead. And that the guy who would steal his bag had not yet been completely born.

The first thing Christopher-Benjamin and I had to do was look at each other straight in the whites of the eyes. It was not avoidable. Christopher-Benjamin mellowed only when he understood I was not after his leather bag. He hung on to the pole and I hoisted him onto my raft. After these acrobatics we were both thoroughly drenched.

Christopher-Benjamin was in such a state of decay I thought he would not survive the winter. He mumbled something: was it a word of encouragement or a revolutionary song? Difficult to say.

I brought him home. I did it without thinking, as I would have brought back any refuse that could have proved advantageous to me.

Building A was spacious enough for the two of us. Anyway, there was still Building B, with its three floors peeking out, (still much less spacious than A with whose seven floors were completely vacant).

No one else besides myself lived in Building A before Christopher-Benjamin arrived. Myself and the Smoke, of course. But the Smoke remained immobile most of the time, laid out in a crevice of the wall in front of the main entrance. I had repaired the trapdoor — it did not show much — and had also fitted out a tiny peephole through which the Smoke could watch my comings and goings.

The Smoke did not react when I entered with Christopher-Benjamin. That amazed me, I who am not easily amazed. I must say I had settled him in front of the main entrance of the Building A, hoping he would serve as a burglar alarm or, at least, as a bell, in case of invasion, and for a long time I sought an occasion to test his efficiency. Perhaps he had simply not considered it appropriate to do so because I was accompanying Christopher-Benjamin. Perhaps the Smoke simply did not immediately understand that Christopher-Benjamin represented a threat.

Before long, I regretted having fished out Christopher-Benjamin from the icy water. I had abandoned him in a corner of the second floor and he began to dry out. He had then emptied the contents of his bag: a bamboo flute, scissors, a ball of string, a handful of feathers and a big box, tied up, holding a bundle of yellowed pages. Everything dry and rolled up in plastic bags.

But nothing to eat.

Through the half-open door, I could watch him as he set up his survival kit: he spread pages on the floor, arranging them in circles. They formed groups, arabesques, still-active volcanoes. Taking a closer look, I could see tiny symbols covering the pages: they seemed to recreate illegible ink-filled labyrinths.

Christopher methodically spread the pages throughout the room. The operation took several hours. He placed the pages one by one in various places, as if trying to find the order it should be in. However, either he no longer remembered the order in question — that he had maybe try to reinvent all these years — or else these sheets had never called for any precise order: Christopher hesitated.

I waited for the next day to enter the room. Christopher-Benjamin was sleeping peacefully, curled up in the corner of the floor that was least dirty. He used his bag as a pillow and some damaged pages as a blanket.

I could have decided to stop everything then. Put an end to it all. But I decided to let the events run their course. It is a personal shortcoming of mine that I must learn to deal with.

For too many years now I have been fishing up Christopher-Benjamin every day at the same time. He grips the pole I aim toward him and I take his emaciated body out of the water. He grumbles faintly. Simple decorum would want that I manhandle him a little. Someone other than I would do so. Anyone. But I just hoist him onto my raft and bring him home. I give him a second life that, perhaps, he does not want. I pull him out of the nothingness into which, until now, he has been joylessly sinking, albeit of his own free will. For that is the peculiar thing about Christopher-Benjamin: he has a will of his own.

But not now. Not while he is sleeping at my feet.

I look at the pages covered with strange symbols. I say *strange* because they seem obscure to me while familiar at the same time. I have already seen similar signs. Often enough to know that I'm dealing with a scrivener. That is what has been worrying me from the start.

Before Christopher-Benjamin's arrival, choppers rarely came up here. The first nights, however, they appeared in droves and with their spotlights scouring the perimeter. Even the deafening noise of the turbines and the muffled knocking of the helixes sawing the air could not awaken Christopher-Benjamin. In the morning, he would grumble and complain he had been eaten, during the night,

by swarms of mosquitoes and suddenly woken up by a rat bite; yet he never heard the choppers. Some nights, they ventured in front of his window and their spotlights swept the story where Christopher-Benjamin slept, but either the scribbling on paper was so insignificant that they did not see it, or they too anticipated the danger Christopher-Benjamin represented: the choppers went away after a while.

Like everyone, I knew that scribes were outlaws. They had been for so long that people hardly could believe any of them were left. I quickly convinced myself that Christopher-Benjamin was the last. The very last scribe. And that I would no more enjoy the peaceful existence I had known until then.

I have never dared to ask him if he would authorize me to blow a few notes in his small bamboo flute. Yet I knew that from the scribe's flute only difficulties could arise, or at least suggestions of difficulties. Still, I would have liked to understand why he was on a raft that morning and I made him understand by means of signs.

" This dark passage where someone runs until he is out of breath, I suggested at random, is perhaps me. " (As an introduction, I could have found something better, but Christopher-Benjamin seemed to appreciate my honesty.)

I questioned him once about the eternal ices and the possibility of going back over there, to the ice floe; yet his expression had hardened. He had been much more talkative when I had mentioned the persistent rumours that the Andes archipelago might be colonized. He seemed to take a keen interest in this information. He appeared avid. That is why I questioned him about this topic as often as possible. Every time I had a chance, to be precise.

Until then, I had devoted most of my time to observing the horizon: a blurry line wavering in the sky and where the waters raged. From then on, I had said to myself, I should keep one eye on the horizon and the other on Christopher-Benjamin.

I was surprised, when, beneath my impartial gaze, he began to blossom and write all kinds of strange signs on the walls of Building A; but this is nevertheless what happened on the seventeenth month of that year. When I awoke that morning, the signs were already spread out on three floors. Christopher-Benjamin had aligned them on the walls and ceilings and seemed to be about to attack the floors and the stairwell.

I had arrived too late: the next time, choppers would certainly see them. Perhaps the satellite had already detected them. Christopher-Benjamin was that kind of guy. He liked taking risks. Eventually, I had to admit that it was a fundamental characteristic of any scrivener worthy to be called one. The only problem with Christopher-Benjamin is that without even realizing it he put the life of his close relations in danger.

I remember something that happened about the same time: the Smoke threw himself down from his roost, breaking his collarbone and inflicting himself with multiple bruises. I found myself obliged to ease this unfortunate creature's pain and recapture his *critical mass*; never had the tomatoes and the beans I grew on the roof of Building B been more delicious than that year. Even Christopher-Benjamin noticed the difference. He commented on the affair with a growl that evoked the dedication of the Smoke and his sense of duty. The subject of Smoke was never again broached by either of us. Times were hard and we knew how to appreciate them.

Christopher-Benjamin took to the sea again a few days after the harvests. I helped him build the raft and put it on the water. I think he just wanted to avoid troubling me.

Sometimes, choppers come back to search the perimeter. They do so without much conviction. They scrutinize the symbols drawn by Christopher-Benjamin, as if they believed they had the slightest chance of discovering their meaning. Most of the time they leave after a while, annoyed at not having been able to decipher anything, but satisfied that they did not have to intervene.