

THE ROCK

By

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Translated by Sam Taylor from the French.

was yelling, too. In a panic, everyone ran from the room. Broussard was left alone, lying unconscious on the stage, blood pouring from his forehead.

When he came to, Robert Broussard was in a hospital bed, half his face covered with bandages. He wasn't in pain. He felt as if he were floating, and he would have liked that sensation of lightness to continue forever. He was a highly successful novelist, but his literary reputation was in inverse proportion to his sales figures. Ignored by the press, he was viewed contemptuously by his peers, who considered it laughable that Broussard should even call himself a writer. And yet he had a long backlist of best sellers and a devoted fan base, made up

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One September evening, as the author Robert Broussard was giving a speech about his latest novel, someone threw a rock at his face. At the moment when the rock left the assailant's hand and began to fly through the air, the novelist was reaching the end of an anecdote that he had told many times before — about Tolstoy's being described as a "disgusting pig." To the author's disappointment, the audience reaction that night was no more than a smattering of polite laughter. He then leaned toward the glass of water on the table next to him, and so it was his left profile that the rock hit. The journalist who was interviewing him cried out in alarm, and soon the audience

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mostly of women. Broussard's books never touched on religion or politics. He had no clear-cut opinions on anything. He did not confront issues such as gender or race, and he kept his distance from the controversies of the day. It came as a surprise that anyone would want to assault him.

A policeman interrogated him. He wanted to know if Broussard had any enemies. Did he owe anyone money? Was he sleeping with another man's wife? He asked lots of questions about women. Did Broussard have many affairs? With what kind of women? Could a jealous or rejected lover have slipped unnoticed into the audience?

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To all these questions, Robert Broussard responded with a shake of the head. Despite his dry mouth and the awful pain he had suddenly begun to feel in his eyeball, he described the nature of his existence to the policeman. He led a tranquil life, without any troubles or complications. Broussard had never been married and spent most of his time at his desk. He would sometimes eat dinner with friends from college, whom he'd known for 30 years, and on Sundays he went to his mother's house for lunch. "Nothing very exciting, I'm afraid," he concluded. The detective shut his notebook and left.

Broussard was now all over the news. Journalists fought for an exclusive interview with him.

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After being discharged from the hospital, Broussard was invited to the Élysée Palace, where the French president, a busy, thin-faced man, acclaimed him as a war hero. "France is in your debt," he told the author. "France is proud of you." A bodyguard was sent to protect him: He visited Broussard's apartment and decided to cover the windows with paper and to move the entry phone to a different spot. The bodyguard was a stocky man with a shaved, shiny head, who told the novelist that he'd spent two months protecting a neo-Nazi pamphleteer who treated him like a servant and sent him to pick up his clothes from the dry cleaner's.

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Broussard was a hero. For some, he was a victim of a far-right vigilante; for others, a target of Islamic extremists. Some people believed that a bitter incel must have sneaked into the room that night, intent on punishing this man who had built his success on the mendacious myth of love. The famous literary critic Anton Ramowich published a five-page article on Broussard's work, which he previously disdained. Ramowich claimed to have deciphered, between the lines of the author's light romantic novels, an acerbic critique of consumer society and a pointed analysis of social divisions. He labeled Broussard "the secret subversive."

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In the weeks that followed, Broussard was invited to dozens of television shows, where the makeup artists took care to highlight the scar on his forehead. When he was asked if he regarded the attack on him as an assault on freedom of expression, his limp replies were taken as proof of modesty. For the first time in his life, Robert Broussard felt loved — and, even better, respected — by everyone around him. When he entered a room, with his black eye, his face like a wounded soldier's, an awed hush would fall in his wake. And his editor would put a hand on his shoulder, as proud as a horse breeder showing off his prize thoroughbred.

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After a few months, the case was closed. No culprit was ever found: There was no camera in the bookstore where the speech was given, and the spectators had given conflicting accounts. On social media, the anonymous criminal became the object of excited speculation. An anarchist journalist, whose reputation was founded on the leaking of politicians' sex tapes, hailed the assailant as an icon of the invisible, forgotten masses. The nameless rock-thrower was the herald of a revolution. In daring to attack Broussard, he had fired the first shot against easy money, undeserved success, the capitalist media and the tyranny of middle-aged white men.

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the true Robert Broussard. He was thinking about all this when the first rock hit him. He didn't see where it came from, nor the ones that followed. He didn't even have time to cover his face with his hands. He just collapsed in the middle of the street, under a rain of stones.

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The novelist's star waned. There were no more invitations to appear on television. His editor advised him to lie low and decided to delay the publication of his new novel. Broussard no longer dared Google himself. The things he read about himself were so full of hate that he found it hard to breathe. He felt his guts twist and drops of sweat trickle down his forehead. He returned to his tranquil, solitary life. One Sunday, after eating lunch with his mother, he decided to walk home. On the way, he thought about the book he wanted to write, the book that would solve everything. A book that would put the chaos of the age into words, that would show the world

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Illustration by *Linda Merad*

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