

VERITAS

*“A la question toujours posée: Pourquoi écrivez-vous?
La réponse du poète sera toujours la plus brève: Pour mieux vivre.”*
Saint-John Perse (1887-1975)

“What is now proved was once only imagined.”
William Blake (1757-1827)

Already published in Dutch:

- “Onze Harmonie” (2006) in collaboration with his son Cédric.
- “Laurent Emile Dewandeleer, mijn grootvader” (2007)
- “Comoedia” (2008)
- “100 jaar Fanfare Gevaertskring” (2009)

Published in Dutch at Les Presses du Midi, Toulon, France:

- “Het Mysterie van de Houten Bommen” translation (2010)
- “ ‘t Is voor ons” novel (2011)
- “Napoleon Verzegeld” essay (2013)
- “Senatus” science fiction (2015)
- “150 jaar Muziek in Machelen” novel (2016)

Published in French at Les Presses du Midi, Toulon, France:

- “Papy, c’est quoi la guerre? ” novel (2012)
- “Napoléon Timbré” essay (2013)
- “Senatus” science fiction (2015)

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1. Murphy

I knew this preposterous story would end dramatically. I knew it right from the beginning. The whole thing started on the 18th of June. I'm quite sure about that specific day because the morning radio announced the commemoration of the anniversary of the battle of Waterloo and it was a Saturday because our neighbour was preparing to cut his grass when it all started. Funnily enough, I cannot remember what year it was.

Anyway, it started out as a rotten day because everything that could go wrong definitely went wrong. First, there was that horrible night with repetitive nightmares. Then, the breakfast with no fruit juice, no bread and ... no coffee! When I went out to fetch the newspaper I found my car was covered with a thin layer of white sand due to unusual atmospheric conditions. I wanted to take a shower but the boiler had decided to start a week-long strike. Most of the time, I'm careful when shaving but that day my hurt lip didn't want to stop bleeding. Of course, it could have been worse. The wound could have become infected and left a lasting scar. And yet ...

It was several days before I decided to put my incredible adventure on paper. I realised that what started that day was totally unbelievable. I was plunged into an unimaginable situation. And yet, I had to find an explanation for what had happened to me, although even today I confess that the reality is still far beyond my comprehension.

The adventure was breath-taking, highly surrealistic. Retrospectively, I have to admit I was a most consenting victim and I have no regrets when I look at what became of the rest of my life.

In the beginning, I experienced wonder, then fear and, later on, some anxiety. Then I was caught up in the excitement of the adventure, which became an all-consuming passion. The challenge was undeniably thrilling. I was Master on Board, right in the heart of the action! But this is to anticipate events that have yet to be recounted, so let's go back to that particular 18th of June ...

2. Clash

I'm in a dreadful mood today and I already know it's going to last for some time. It's not only because the night was appalling. I know that nightmares are an essential part of dreaming but that one was pretty awful. It's always the same vividly realistic scene over and over again. I'm walking through a cemetery looking for the thumb of my mother. The setting is classically misty and dim. After a while I perceive a woman on her knees. As I walk towards her I take in her beauty. I stop next to her. I remain speechless when she raises her eyes to me. I realise she is my mother in her younger days. She first smiles at me, then starts carving my name on a brand new gravestone. Gently hitting the granite with her spoon chisel, she seems to take a sadistic pleasure in showing me her carving skills. When she has finished, she looks at me again. She opens her mouth to speak but nothing comes. Then without warning she starts yelling and I wake up in a cold sweat barely able to breathe. I have to get up. I need some water. Semi-sparkling. After a while I decide to return to bed, desperately longing for Morpheus and in no time I'm back in the graveyard! I know it's a dream; completely stupid and very disturbing. The only thing that bothers me at this very moment is that I am exhausted. "Total loss", as my daughter would say.

I'm sure a good nutritious breakfast is going to improve things a slight bit, but the ordeal seems to go on: the fridge happens to be empty. No juice, no eggs, no bacon, no bread and above all no milk for my coffee which is really bad. I hate black coffee. As a matter of fact, the present situation seems to plunge me in another nightmare. It is as if I'm trapped into Scott Moore's painting *High Bread*. Fairly scary.

When my wife enters the kitchen, she immediately understands there is something wrong.

"I told you about the fridge," she says sarcastically while making her tea and she adds "Don't you complain about the crowd in the super market."

I decide to ignore the warning message because I don't want to enter into a useless debate. The best thing I can do is to remain positive and look forward. I have to pull myself together. There is no other way. Life goes on.

The hope is reborn when the weather forecast announces a brilliant day: a pleasant temperature, blue sky, no rain.

But when I realise that the newspaper isn't delivered, it's automatically the song of 1935 "*Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise*" that pops into my mind. Obviously the glass remains desperately half empty.

I jealously stare at Monique. She's sipping her tea while reading a travel brochure. After a while I persuade myself that this could be the ideal opportunity to experiment with my new weapon against my eternal enemy.

My Welsh friend used to say that when one mole disappears, another one takes its place. I'm convinced there's only one mole active in the garden, but she drives me completely crazy with the small Himalayas she leaves every morning. I tried every possible system to get rid of Anastasia (that's the name I gave her). The list is endless: broken glass, mothballs, traps, bleach, thorny branches, ultrasonic and other vibrating devices ... When I think I've solved the problem, she comes back with a kind of vengeance. Last year I planted a vegetative barrier composed of daffodils, marigolds, alliums, and other "mole" plants. According to the publicity on the package, this was going to be the miracle solution. The problem of course is that Anastasia can't read.

I don't want to make a mountain out of a molehill, but this time I'm really tired. Actually, I'm fed up, no, I'm sick to death. From now on war is declared. I already lost a few battles and hundreds of Euros, but I know this time the strategy is the good one. Two batteries of 12 Caster Bean also known as castor-oil plant are going to eliminate my most hated small mammal. As Monique doesn't want to be present at my next humiliation, she compassionately proposes to do some shopping.

This leaves me a couple of hours to refine and improve my battle plan. To ensure a proper operation, I read for the last time the user instructions carefully. Select the strategic places around the lawn. Dig a hole about the size of the root ball every seven metres. Place the seedling in the hole, a little higher than it was in its container, and back fill with soil. Water well - even if rain is forecast. Well, it sounds easy, too easy. One hour later, the forced labour is well advanced. In order to distinguish the hole locations from the inevitable weeds, I eventually plant near every hole a brand new, fluorescent yellow camping stake. Call it the finishing touch.

The work is now completed and it's time for a coffee, without milk, of course. From my *chaise longue* on the terrace, I gaze out upon the green lawn in a state of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wholeness. "Damn, it's good to be me ... " my son would say.

While sipping the hot coffee, my eye falls upon the old ladder left in the back of the garden. This is not the best way to decrease the chance of experiencing property crime. Better to bring it back in the garage.

Statistically speaking, the risk of stumbling while crossing a lawn is non-existent, except for today of course.

My underground dweller has an established network of tunnels over the whole surface of the garden and, as I approach the halfway point of my expedition, suddenly the ground collapses and I crash to the ground, almost twisting my ankle.

Totally enraged, I finally get to the back of the garden. I lift the step ladder, using my knees, not my back. I know why. Methodically, I place the torture tool below my shoulder with my left arm extending through the rails. When the ladder is finally steady and in control, I cautiously start the voyage back.

And then, in a split-second ... Bang! Aaargh ...

My goodness, what a crash! Crumbling to the ground, with my legs under the ladder, I look around, but there is not the slightest obstacle in the surroundings.

And yet, I'm quite certain I hit something.

I'm sure the attempts to extricate myself from this ridiculous situation can be nominated for an entry in the Guinness Book of Records. When I ultimately manage to get up, full of bruises, I try to understand what happened.

My neighbour who also works in his garden obviously heard me screaming. He gently raises his head above our common hedge and wants to know if I'm all right.

"Yes, thank you. I just fell with the ladder."

"Nothing hurt?" asks Miguel.

"No, thank you. It's okay. It's nothing more than a stupid accident."

I look attentively at him and realise that he too doesn't see any obstacle. The problem is I can still feel the pain in my knees.

When he resumes his activities, I take the ladder on my other shoulder and proceed to the house. Two seconds later the same scenario with the same invisible obstacle. Fortunately, this time the shock is less severe. However, there is no doubt. Although I can't see it, there is something there on the ground, right in front of me.

I leave the ladder beside me and cautiously approach the invisible object. It's amazing! I touch something real. It's smooth, cool and rather large, definitely an object that doesn't fit into a car.

I wonder about Miguel's reaction but the 90 decibels of his lawn mower reassure me a great deal. I can go on with my investigation. My doctor usually says we have to perform an examination, formulate a diagnosis and propose appropriate treatment. I wonder what his diagnosis would be in this very particular case.

The 'thing' I'm caressing is cylindrical, probably oval with an estimated length of three metres and in the centre a height of a little bit more than one metre. It must weigh quite a lot, but ... there are no marks in the grass!

What the hell is going on here? It's a most surreal situation. I know I had a ladder accident. I hurt my elbow, my ankle and both knees. The whole world could hear my agony and there is no logical explanation available. This is completely irrational, but one thing is for sure: the obstacle wasn't there on the way to the back of the garden and it suddenly appeared when returning to the house.

I need a break. Without losing sight of the crime scene, I carefully step backwards to my *chaise longue*. First things first, get some ice to reduce swelling and pain. A bag of frozen peas will do fine. And another coffee is a must. Espresso, double shot. I've got to think logically.

No matter how I look at the events, I cannot find one sensible explanation for these events. It simply doesn't make sense. This story is completely unbelievable. The only thing I can see on the grass is that cursed ladder, but I need to know and understand what happened. So, after a few minutes, I decide to go back to the place where the accident occurred.

"Are you sure everything is all right?" is Miguel's question.

"Why do you ask that?"

"It's because of the way you're walking."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it is as if you're afraid of that ladder," and his smile says it all.

"I'm limping because I injured my ankle."

This clarification gives my favourite neighbour an extra wrinkle on his forehead. I believe it was Albert Einstein who said that only a fool keeps repeating the same things expecting a different result. So, let's keep calm and sit back on the terrace. With both elbows on the table, I try to distress in order to think more calmly. After a few deep breaths, I start with a progressive muscle relaxation. Starting with the toes, I try to relax each muscle of my body. When I'm finished with the face, I notice Eduardo - that's our robotic mower - has begun his working day. It's always a pleasure to see him manoeuvre. I remember the shop assistant when she convinced us to invest in such a machine. Her arguments were so obvious that we didn't hesitate long. Eduardo cuts the grass automatically - around the clock and without supervision. He works in silence, without producing harmful emissions. Also it is very comic when he knows when he needs to be charged. When he meets an obstacle, he stops and redirects himself...

I wonder ... Yes, I wonder if ...

Just cross my fingers and hope for the best. The only thing I want to be sure of is if Eduardo is going to detect 'something'.

Ten minutes later I'm certain the threat has been averted. What a relief! It was a crazy situation, totally unbelievable and most of all unexplainable to my wife! However, all in all, I'm still not fully persuaded. It would be better to have an extra confirmation. Suddenly, a brilliant idea: water!

A few moments later, I start systematically to water the lawn. My neighbours can't believe their eyes. It has been raining the last few days more than in a whole season and now I'm playing with the garden hose on a lawn that is greener than the grounds in Wimbledon before the Championships. A little voice tells me not to bother and go on with the job. If enough water gets on my 'thing', I should be able to visualize it.

After a while, it's the ultimate deliverance: visually there is nothing to report! Undoubtedly, there was something - my bruises confirm it - , but now it's definitely gone.

I just have to go up there for a reliable tactile feedback. The problem is that Miguel and Maria keep an eye on me. For sure, they must think I'm suffering from senile dementia. Although Maria might think it's due to an overdose of aperitif. Anyway, as clever strategist, I'm prudently getting down on all fours and start to collect the small stones and other pieces of broken glass that surfaced over time onto the lawn. At regular intervals, I stop my progression pretending to be tired. I stretch my back, take a slow, deep breath and then resume my cleaning operations towards the calamity place.

"Do you need some help?" asks my wife who has returned home.

"No, thank you. Give me another ten minutes and I'll be ready for lunch."

"Be careful with your back," she shouts.

"I know. I know ..."

Let's concentrate and continue the treasure hunt. I've got to finish this last straight line. When I'm pretty sure to have been digging far enough, I straighten up with the satisfaction of having accomplished my duty. At that very moment, while turning around, I hit the horrible stuff.

Curiously, my reaction is extremely calm.

"Stoical in adversity", as my illustrious compatriot Justus Lipsius would say.

More than deeply affected, I quietly walk to the terrace and take a seat.

It's now certain: I've got a problem.

An extremely big problem.

3. Stonehenge

Night is falling. From inside the house, I continue the investigation. I surf the Net in the hope of discovering some reassuring information. After a few hours online, I have to admit the final result is highly disappointing. I tried everything on Google, going from items such as “invisibility”, “science fiction” or even “optical illusion”. Nothing, absolutely nothing, seems to coincide with what happened in the garden. I’m progressively getting very nervous, but what really drives me crazy is that same pathetic message coming back: “No results found”.

“Holy shit! I’m sick of it all.”

When my wife hears this unusual cry for help, she kindly makes me realize it’s really late.

“I’m coming, darling.”

I close the laptop, switch off the lights in the kitchen and walk reluctantly to the bedroom. I suppose that’s what they call bedtime procrastination.

“You look worried,” says my Monique.

“I suppose so,” is the gloomy answer and she feels obliged to start a discussion.

“A bad day?” is her new try.

“You could put it that way. Nothing went the way I planned.”

“Life is not a bed of roses ...”

“... nor a bed of thorns. I know, I know, but today was really a rotten day.”

“The moles?”

“The moles and all the rest.”

“All the rest ...?” and now she’s really bothered.

“You shouldn’t worry, you know. Tomorrow is another day.”

When I turn off the light she tries a last attempt with “You don’t want to talk about it, do you?”

“No.”

I know this is not the most intelligent answer, but what is the alternative?

During the next five minutes I meditate about my fathers’ words: never start a marital conflict in the evening before going to bed. When Monique starts snoring I know it will go crescendo. Sometimes she snores like a teakettle, other times more like a steam shovel. Years ago it kept me awake for hours and hours with the aggravating circumstance that sometimes it made me unable to go to work the next day. It was impossible to teach after a sleepless night.

As I'm presently retired, the situation is slightly different and I may say that her snoring today gives me a rather relaxing sensation. To hear her melodious breathing, mostly soft and sometimes even pleasant, provides me a curious feeling of satisfaction, perhaps due to aging, who knows? Anyway, for the present moment, I have other fish to fry.

Silently I escape from the bedroom and proceed to the garden. The night scene is gorgeous, beyond imagination. It's full moon, the stars in the sky are practically non-existent and I'm gently moving in a shadowy world towards the mysterious location. Amazingly enough I'm not terrorized, just a bit confused. After all, the only thing I want is a rational explanation. As I'm getting closer, I fully understand what Emiliana Torrini means when she sings "*My heart is beating like a jungle drum*". And then, suddenly, the divine caress.

The thing is still there, right in front of me, rather cold, metal and profiled. When stroking with both hands over the smooth surface, I feel a certain resistance. It's, at the same time, scary, overwhelming and terribly exciting. I'm desperately searching for something such as an automatic door opening device. There are no edges and strangely enough, I cannot lift the voluminous object!

No doubt, this is something unknown to me and I don't think it's going to disappear any time soon. The best thing to do presently is to mark the search area. Very stealthily, I walk over the lawn and plant a dozen of fluorescent yellow camping stakes all around the thing.

And now, it's time to go to bed!

Through the rear side window I take a last look over my shoulder and must admit that my little Stonehenge is magnificent in the moonlight.

4. Neighbours

Needless to say the night was too short.

Usually my breakfast is the best meal of the day, but at the moment I'm not really in the mood to enjoy it. So, a few toasts and a cup of coffee will do.

When the newspaper is read, I automatically start with the Sudoku puzzle. It's supposed to be a great daily workout for the brain. I'm not yet finished when the doorbell rings. I hate opening the door when I'm not shaved and even more important is the fact that I'm quite sure now that Monique is awake.

To my big surprise, it's our neighbours Miguel and Maria. They come with their children to help clean the garden. Obviously, they did have some compassion for my suffering yesterday. Before I can thank them properly, they take the path on the right side of the house. It's great to have such good neighbours, always ready to help. It is clear that within the shortest time the four of them will be able to remove tons of pieces of broken glass. Holy shit! I'm forgetting my invisible thing. I run to the garden and look with dismay at the front line that rushes towards the forbidden zone.

Whew, what can I do? How can I explain?

In less than five minutes, they have already covered a pretty good distance. While their buckets get filled with hundreds of colourful stones, glass, plastic and other debris, I'm experiencing all possible emotions at the same time. Monique is now dressed and joins me in the garden.

"I told you to be careful with your back," she says with an outrageous smile on her face.

As I don't want to start an argument, I ask Miguel if he wants to take a break.

"No thanks. We just started, you know."

"Yes, I know, but ... take care of your back. You don't have to do it all ... I mean, so fast. Be careful, please."

"Don't worry. If you want to help, you can make some coffee. That would be fine."

I'm petrified, nearly paralyzed. They have to slow down, but I don't know how to curtail their insane enthusiasm. The confrontation is unavoidable. Resigned, I take refuge in the kitchen. Almost automatically, I remove the water tank, fill it with cold tap water and reinsert it in the coffee machine. I can't remember which coffee they usually have. Is it the Colombian or the Italian style? No, I think Miguel will have a decaffeinated one and Maria will go for the biological & Fair Trade Coffee. Or vice versa? We'll see. On the radio, it's always the same kind of information. Sunny intervals and traffic jams, some actress died and Manchester United didn't win.

“Aaaaaah,” says Miguel when he takes a seat next to his wife; “Coffee time! It’s more tiring than I thought, but the kids will finish it. Oh, nearly forgot! I removed the yellow stakes in the middle of the lawn. I hope it’s OK?”

“No problem ...” and I instantly realise the importance of the salutary information. I rush outside and can’t believe my eyes: the children are playing badminton!

It is incomprehensible! Disappeared... vanished...

“This is the best coffee break in my life,” I nearly shout to Monique.

“Are you sure everything is OK?”

“Oooh yesss” and I take a long slow breath.

“Sure?”

“Absolutely ... YES!”