

The Miracle of Belgium

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p 11-25

1.

The winter I first came into contact with the master swindler, I felt as though I was wearing other people's clothes, had glasses with the wrong prescription on my nose, as though I wasn't at home in the streets that had been familiar to me, a sense of displacement came over me like an admonishing finger pointing from the voice deep inside me saying I was an impostor, that I wasn't a novelist but belonged behind a factory conveyor belt for deep-fryer snacks, or behind a packed desk in an office. That year, I had had a violent panic attack on the train, my body slammed double, sweat gushed from every pore, my head wanted to flee from my torso, and in the months that followed, I had severe heart palpitations on a regular basis, as if the heart muscle skipped a few beats and my lungs suddenly independently decided that they didn't want to breathe any more, which, of course, had also been panic attacks. That was my internal climate, so to speak, when I met the master swindler.

It was only later that it was pointed out to me that swindlers can immediately tell when someone's head is down.

2.

My debut novel had not become the success I had hoped for and my poetry collections also sold poorly. In *De Standaard*, my novel was dismissed as a total failure in a hundred and seven words. My book got one star. That was a reviewer's right, to find a book to be bad. Soon after, a disgruntled reader emailed that my 'main motivations for writing are, in no particular order, money-making, self-glorification and outwitting and scaring up unattractive and ignorant young ladies'. I laughed out the other side of my face and deleted the email. Once before, a short piece had appeared by a Dutch poet who made firewood of my first book of poetry and claimed I was unable to write poems. Those were not pleasant pieces to read, but well, there were plenty of reviews that offered a positive counterpoint.

The novel sold 1962 copies. No unattractive or ignorant young ladies presented themselves, and I certainly didn't get rich off of it.

A bad reaction didn't necessarily mean the end, until a longer piece appeared in which a staff member of the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature stupidly confessed to having an

aversion to me. He put the blame for this not on the qualities of the novel and poetry collections I had written, but on my reputation. I was said to have been euphorically raved about with my first book of poetry in 2008 and to have exhibited too lofty ambitions in interviews. This had caused suspicion not only with him, he wrote, but also with the rest of the literary world. The writer and well-known anthologist Gerrit Komrij had pulled me out of the pile of manuscripts when I was 20 and called me a prodigy, and that had gone down the wrong way with many critics. The reviewer didn't say it in so many words, but he suspected me of being an arrogant poser seeking attention. According to him, I attached too much importance to appearances, the clothes I wore, my glasses and my quiff. That prejudice was obtuse but nevertheless knocked me out of my stride.

He could not know that I had shaved off my quiff only a month before, as if I had anticipated his piece. My short hair may have brought coolness in the summer heat, but it did not illuminate the dark thoughts that haunted my mind. Was I a poacher posing as an artist? Was it illegitimate that people had discovered my literary talent? I never considered myself a prodigy, but maybe they were right. Maybe I was a phony pretending to be able to write. For instance, I was not proud that they would discover that I had nicked the opening lines of my first novel from a film on the same subject.

I tried not to be distracted by the biased contemplation, but I didn't quite succeed. My self-confidence about the life I was leading had taken a serious hit. During lectures, I suddenly got tired of my own character standing there reciting. I stood there orating like an imitation of myself. In libraries, I saw the plastic chairs staring at me while I answered the interviewer's questions with witticisms. A little voice inside me detached itself from my body and sat down among the audience. Look at that shitty writer standing there reading his shitty writing with shitty intonation, the voice said. Watch the poet scribble his measly verse lines in his notebook.

I alienated myself from my own lines, as if the phrases had been forged by someone else, and realised that this was a sign that I was also alienating myself. In a first reflex, I went to a speaking coach, a theatre director I knew from before, who taught me some rhetorical tricks and breathing exercises. The exercises helped, and for a while I stood in the wings of the theatre where I was being interviewed, or between the library shelves, jabbing out vowels like an angry cat, e, a, i, o, u, or pretending to chew an imaginary gum rudely with my mouth open, or licking my tongue along all my teeth, including the ones in the back. Then I washed an invisible ceiling above my head with my hands. Anyone who saw me busy must have thought I had lost my mind as I tried desperately to gain control of my voice.

If I was a poser, it was time to take a deep look at that one.

3.

At that same time, I had been chosen by the production house Woestijnvis to take part in a selection test for a Belgian television quiz called *The Smartest Person in the World*. Each contestant was catapulted to unimaginable starry heights by this ratings hit. Thanks to the programme, politicians had been elected and writers and musicians had boosted their sales figures. Needless to say, I was already counting the towering stacks of my debut novel in bookstores in my mind. But I wasn't selected, perhaps because of my nervousness, or was it because of my insecurity-induced arrogance? I told friends I didn't have a face for television.

As my savings were gradually dwindling, I applied to the creative director of Woestijnvis for work after the test shoot. After a second test, far away from the cameras, I was allowed to start as a copywriter for *The Smartest Person in the World*. I had to neither answer nor make up the questions, but write humorously intended connecting texts for the presenter and a panel of comedians. It was the first time I was to put words into someone's mouth against payment. Disillusioned, I watched a

coarse-mouthed best-selling author who was part of the panel of comedians pronounce my script on television that evening.

The programme was known for its joke density, more so than the trivial facts the viewer picked up. The laughs between question and answer could sometimes last for minutes because of the presenter's giggles. The candidates were invariably introduced at the beginning of the broadcast with semi-offensive rhymes after which they were bombarded with the silliest of puns and sexist claptrap for an hour and a half. All the spontaneity was carefully rehearsed; the makers recorded two episodes a day. I had not appropriated the misogynistic tone the programme was known for, as far as that was possible, but for twelve weeks I composed dirty jokes and funny dialogue to order. Even before the sun was up, I crawled behind my computer to collect witticisms. I was not surprised that very little of my text was used in the recording studio and then another half perished in editing. I remember only one joke that made it to the television screen.

'What is cheese's favourite music?'

'R&Brie.'

I was not asked back for a second season.

4.

The week the final of the quiz was filmed and my television work was almost over, I heard a stammering voice on national radio declaring that he was one of the world's all-time great master swindlers, with a lifelong career of swindling, forgery, abuse of trust and false name-dropping, and that he did it all in the hope of appearing on television.

That was Piet Van Haut.

He said he had run away from home as a child and had been sending bills for his train trips, branded clothes and hotel bills to his innocent parents ever since. He slept somewhere else every night. By tampering with doctors' prescriptions for asthma sprays and health fund reimbursements, he defrauded dozens of pharmacists as a child. He had been examined by more than 30 doctors, he said, after which they concluded that he had an IQ of 35 and was decidedly retarded.

In the morning he posed as a director and in the evening as a lawyer. Unhindered by his limited intelligence, Piet Van Haut spoke about how he pretended to be a public prosecutor and how he had requisitioned a gendarmerie helicopter for an inspection flight above the prisons of Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp. On several occasions, he managed to outsmart the police force by having himself deleted from international investigation databases on the authority of a pretended high magistrate.

Having stolen several millions over the years, by taking out fraudulent loans from various banks or extorting money from private individuals, he was jailed for four years, from where he continued his activities unabated. More than nine hundred female lawyers came to visit him, lured by the promise of getting a piece of his fortune, he said, it involved more than ten different lawyers a day.

I had rarely heard anyone stutter so much.

5.

As I understood it, Piet Van Haut had been released.

A quick search of his profiles on the internet taught me that he still drove around in the latest luxury cars and flew around the world in private jets as if the devil was hot on his heels. With visible

pleasure, he sold his colourful stories in the press. I was annoyed and amused at the same time, and instinctively understood that I wanted to write about this figure because of the boyish romance that oozed from it. He was a drifter who changed faces and names on a daily basis.

Why is someone who scams for millions and impersonates someone he isn't not only in jail for a handful of years but also able to continue his victory lap in the media unabated? How can someone with such a low IQ achieve such a thing, let alone narrate it in full on the radio? And even if he made up some of his improbable stunts, surely he must have some creative intelligence to come up with all those scenarios? I wanted to know what was actually true about that.

The stuttering voice on the radio sounded like the magic rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland* trying to lure me into his non-sensical beast hole. I followed hesitantly. Like the way people jump out of a plane for kicks, I thought I had found an exciting writing project. Losing control for a while. An adventure with no real danger, the imaginative world of a child, contained in a novel that I could start reading or close at any time.

I felt that I had stumbled on a fantastic story that I initially wanted to turn into a chunky novel, a key novel that overlapped a couple of decades and brought up a dozen characters entangled in an inextricable knot thanks to numerous psychological motifs and unimaginable stunts by the master con man, that idea I scribbled mindlessly in my notebook. Although the story would be based on true facts, I would invent additional characters, motifs and story transitions, because it had to be a novel. After all, I was a novelist and not an investigative journalist. My book was not to be journalistic trash.

6.

I sent an e-mail to his lawyer asking to exchange thoughts with him and to get the contact details of his client, and I sent a message to a journalist from the weekly *HUMO* who I vaguely knew and from whom I found out that she had met the master swindler once for an interview, after which she had eventually decided not to write about him.

The journalist was kind enough to copy the full press review on the master swindler for me and deliver it to me by post. The thick package dropped in my mailbox a few days later. Correction, the postman rang the bell because the envelope wouldn't fit through the letterbox. The stack spanned the decades from the 1980s to the present, proving that he was indeed one of the greatest master swindlers of the Low Countries and that he had indeed impersonated a high magistrate or diplomat on several occasions. The headlines read, for example: 'Master swindler exonerates himself'; 'Piet Van Haut causes uproar again'; 'Nobody will ever get hold of me'; 'Fantast files complaint against 237 lawyers and magistrates'; 'Master swindler on the run'; 'Swindler Piet Van Haut roams Germany'.

As a warning, the journalist also added a screenshot of his digital messages. Their conversation was one-way traffic. Over the years, Piet Van Haut made her several proposals for reports starring him: reports on the SM world, the fate of internees, his very latest phone that no one else had.

For example, he asked her: 'Isn't it a good idea to end the year with me on the cover of *HUMO*?'

A purified criminal would normally seek the lee, but the journalist immediately made it clear to me that this narcissistic man was taking every opportunity to appear in the media, more so, the press kit proved that his inordinate need for interest was also being satisfied. He desperately sought attention with the most fabulous stories, wanting to become famous and land the cover of magazines. He had succeeded in part by stalking celebrities, crashing borrowed sports cars or impersonating dignitaries.

7.

For instance, I found numerous newspaper articles in the press archives that mentioned that in the 1990s, Piet Van Haut impersonated the Belgian ambassador to Madrid and landed at Schiphol Airport in a rented Falcon 900 jet, where the Dutch Ministry of the Interior, led by Prime Minister Wim Kok, awaited him with the red carpet, while singing the Belgian 'Brabançonne', to be escorted by armoured vehicles and bellowing sirens from the Royal Military Police to the centre of Amsterdam to sign a leasing contract for 18 Boeings.

'That's an exaggeration,' Piet corrected his own exploits in another newspaper interview. 'Those weren't eighteen Boeings but eighteen Fokkers.'

At the ministry's expense he stayed at the Amstel hotel in Amsterdam for a month, he then claimed, a hotel bill of around a few million francs plus caviar and lobster, altogether a sum of nearly four million francs. It took nine weeks for the Dutch to realise that he was not who he was pretending to be. They neglected to lodge a complaint, he said, so as not to jeopardise the international partnerships between Belgium and the Netherlands.

8.

During the same period, Piet dressed up in an Armani suit as one of the three hundred and fifty cousins of an Arab sheikh and showed a lifelong interest in buying two depreciated Boeings in the flight school at Lelystad airport in the Netherlands. According to himself, he made private trips almost daily for a fortnight with four hostesses, two pilots and four co-pilots, for a total of four thousand to ten thousand euros, depending on which newspaper asked him about it in the years that followed. 'There were almost 20 women ready to share the bed with me, but I didn't respond to that,' he said. In his own words, he fell through when he was spotted in a local couples club as the oil sheikh's son, which was not in keeping with his faith.

I found the anecdote in many newspaper articles. Piet Van Haut's life had apparently not only been made up by himself but also partly reinforced in newspapers, television and tabloids, because the story shrank as I got closer to the date of the facts. Slightly disappointed, I found the original newspaper article of 15 August 1995 which brought a less exciting version of the facts.

Piet had acted very pompously as the wealthy son of a Belgian ambassador when he arrived at Lelystad airport that week. He presented a suitcase with money and wanted to book some flying lessons. He convinced the director of the flight school of his diplomatic power by checking his identity details over the phone. To everyone's surprise, he applied the same trick to other people in the business. The director was convinced he was dealing with someone important, he said in the interview, and he gave Piet Van Haut a tour, some flying lessons and actually sold him two planes. The swindler only fell through when it turned out that the case contained worthless foreign currency. Piet called it a misunderstanding and absconded.

9.

It is not illogical for a writer with a practice of dawdling, daydreaming and fabulating to be interested in the story of a mythomaniac staging his own life. I suffer from a slight melancholy towards a

handful of trades I will never be able to practise and lives I will never be able to lead. In a way, I had to agree with the hustler: every person has several possible biographies and it would be a shame to pick just one version.

Over the years, Piet Van Haut has practised the professions of waiter, driver, hotel receptionist and onion grower while he had only gone on to study for shoemaker (without obtaining the diploma, however) and played, with varying degrees of success, for train driver, administrator-general of the national railways, lawyer, doctor, crisis manager, director of a hotel chain boss of a telecom company or seller of satellite phones, personnel consultant of a cleaning company, attorney general, investigating judge, bailiff, police inspector, director of the prison, brothel operator, owner of a marriage bureau or posed as king of the Belgians, illegitimate son of the king, son of a minister, diplomat, oil sheikh and billionaire. In my presence, Piet Van Haut would end up posing as a neuropsychiatrist, director of the pharmaceutical company Johnson & Johnson, editor-in-chief of my publishing house and as Maarten Inghels.

10.

The moment a biography of Piet Van Haut was published, his lawyer was reported to have said, a black day dawned in the magistracy because then its corruption would come to the surface – I was obviously not yet aware of everything. The lawyer responded to my e-mail three days later, saying that he did not want to put me in touch with Piet Van Haut to save him from ‘rash statements that could get him in trouble again. It is important for him to stay out of the media’.

I found the reluctance ironic as I found a radio clip where I heard him giving a talk promoting one of his new books, with Piet at his side, who had chauffeured him to the studio and was allowed to describe how much his lawyer cared for him. It was apparently important for the master swindler to stay away from the media, except when at his lawyer’s side.

This lawyer was someone who himself was sometimes suspected of attention-seeking, the same attention-seeking I was recognised in myself, as well as in the master swindler, the attention-seeking that to a greater or lesser degree turned most of us into a poser. From the 1990s onwards, the lawyer was regularly invited as an expert in his profession to testify in panel discussions on Belgian television about the injustices he perceived far beyond his office, or took up the defence in increasingly mediatised court trials, and the criminal lawyer was recognised as someone who sometimes felt so sorry for himself he would bring tears to his eyes. The star lawyer obtained a record number of acquittals in the assize court, not infrequently on the grounds that the defendant was suffering from a whim of insanity at the time, or was acting under irresistible urges.

Don Quixote was consumed by the desire to become a knight hero after reading knight novels, too much fiction made his brain boil over and he set off on a reckless adventure, just as the media-hungry Piet Van Haut wanted to be a famous television star after an overdose of television. That desire crystallised into the absurd idea of being able to sit next to the star lawyer in a television studio.

‘I pull stunts in order to appear in the media with my lawyer,’ Piet once declared in the newspaper.

Seeing the lawyer busy on television reminded me of my grandfather’s teeth, which I sometimes accidentally saw grinning in a glass of water. In his own words, whenever Piet Van Haut saw the legendary lawyer busy on television, he became emotional.

11.

Although my subject begged for attention, both the journalist and the lawyer made me question whether it was a good idea to feed the self-adoration of one of the country's biggest vanity-mongers. Although he angled for press interest, and often got it, perhaps I needed to protect someone with a limited IQ from himself.

I convinced myself that Piet Van Haut was not a novelistic anarchist, but a ruthless professional scribe who had no compassion for his victims. His stunts may have been unforgettable, but I suspected that a lot of victims were still trying in vain to forget him. As far as I knew, he had not killed people as the talented Mr. Ripley had, but Piet Van Haut was, according to some online sources, a freebooter with unmanageable temper tantrums, a pathological liar, a shrewd mythomaniac and an incorrigible narcissist who still felt he had done nothing wrong.

With a book, I would put the master con man on a pedestal and enlarge his myth. Having no desire to burn my fingers on that, I tried to forget the idea. With the money from television, I focused on writing a collection of poetry full of poems about the desire to be invisible, a subject that was right up my alley.

But I had awakened the sleeping dragon.
