

## *Charleroi Nails*

From the beginning when I got to Charleroi Nails, I felt the presence of CheBob, my auxiliary spirit. Those were my first nights, spent alone at the hotel, wondering what the hell I was doing there. Chebob was part Bob Marley, part Che Guevara. Except then CheBob had shifted shapes for the first time. Bob was all red, a big shapeless potato with large ears, tiny little legs and a minuscule black cowboy hat. With that hat he was on a mission. He had to see and hear it all. Bob was red with bad conscience, bad humor and dread. What an idea. Under what lousy pretense did he come and hide here? "I've got nothing to do in Charleroi Nails," thought Bob, \_"what a cheat, it's gonna bring me bad luck." Luckily, there was Che, transmogrified into a rug. Prayer-rug-like or a little rug to sit in the grass with. He had turned green, like a being of chlorophyll. In order to imagine Che, one should picture him midair, or like a rug you'd throw on the ground. He was undulating like a S. Che, who was in full depression, started to feel better soon after he got to Charleroi Nails.

At the hotel, to calm Che down, I spend some time in a cocoon. I wrap myself entirely in a wool blanket after I've jammed its corner in a door. Then, my back to the door, I lean slowly while pulling on the blanket. In the end, I hang in a diagonal, with all my weight. To calm Bob down, I shut myself behind two doors, between the one from the bathroom and the one from the hallway, the handles of which are touching when they're both opened. With the hallway wall, it forms a triangle. I wait inside, cramped in, holding the handles with one hand.

Lucky Lukes are legion in Charleroi.

We take the car, CheBob and I, the two of them in the front, me in the back; Bob is driving. We're taking laps on the Ring, the elevated peripheral highway. Above the factories, the air is extremely loaded and that evening the sun is powerful enough to create iridescence. Iridescences are pretty but Che and Bob are coming

to fix. To fix, on the Ring, it takes dozens of laps. You sample the landscape in your mind and at each turn you paste the snippet in a loop until, by driving above a tomato greenhouses for instance, you feel like you're flying above a red speckled ocean of glass, indefinitely. Waiting to take off, Che and Bob babble on quietly:

“You listening' to me, Che? Last night, uptown, I almost got mugged. It's sketchy at night over there! I was by myself, walking - I didn't act like a tourist, I didn't slow down. That guy, as soon as he saw me, he started yelling at me. I was like: Don't hit me man, I've got green blood. He goes: Green blood? You fuckin' kidding me? You fuckin' kidding me? You're crazy man, You fuckin' kidding me? On and on, he kept going in a loop. But still, he didn't hit me...”

“Green blood?”

“Yeah Che, just like you.”

Che and Bob are cruising at thirty (km/h), the optimal speed to fix without risk, with all the puddles, truck tires, and vendor's carts. An enormous billboard crosses the sky, all lit up, slow as the drag of a galley's oar. It says: UTILISEZ UN CURE-DENT. Use a toothpick. Black letters. The background is DayGlo orange, gold and metallic copper: a giant magma marble, single dipped. It is an ad for the Water Marble Palace. Secret tips from the stars for perfect nails. It used to be the Palais des Expositions, but now it's the WMP, the largest water marble tutorial recording center in the world. Fifty thousand square meters, thirty thousand booths, open 24/7, nothing but volunteer instructors... Bob wonders who's the creator of the marble magma.

“Marguerite Noir. You know Bob, every time we come on the Ring, I think of this video I saw on youtube... A scene in a garden, somewhere in the American countryside. Some kids play around a trampoline in the back of a hilly garden lined with poplars. It's shot by a girl with an iphone. The kids are all excited because the oldest one is going to do a backflip. That's the title of the video, *Backflip*. So, she gets on the trampoline and BAM!! She does a backflip and comes down. Kids are shrieking and applauding. Then, suddenly, the iPhone slips out of her hand: it films the inside of her sleeve, a big grey sweater. Then the palm of her hand, macro. It's like a pink landscape. The girl is wearing a band, a piece of jewelry, a ring you know? It looks like it's wrapped around a tree trunk, all pink. It says LOVE on it. She's wearing a LOVE ring.”

“And this one? Who's it by?”

He's talking about the upcoming billboard: AJOUTEZ DU DILUANT. Add some thinner. White and pink pearly background, classic.

“MySimpleLittlePleasure it seems. Blah.”

“You know, after that crazy guy, last night, with my green blood, I went and drew stuff in store windows, Rue de la Montagne, till late...”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Yesterday? Shoes.”

“What? You can't afford them?”

“Yes, but without the window it's not as good, I like the window! So, I was quietly drawing shoes when two guys showed up, one black and one white with a face like a fox, both just laughing their asses off...”

“No zombies then...”

“No, those guys were smoking weed. We chatted a bit. They asked if I did that in other cities. I said yes, they bursted with laughter. I said: - Even in China. They were like: - Ha hou wharf wharf! They were making fun of me. The black dude asks if Chinese girls are faithful... I'm like: - What? Faithful? The hell I know? I was only there a month. The fox looking guy is like: - are you thick dude? He was only there a month! The black guy's like: - Did you screw a Chinese chick over there? - Yeah. - Is it true they're all...that their pussy is this tight? He clenches his fist into a tiny well. - Yeah. - Whaaaarf hou hou ha ha wharf!”

“Can you keep at thirty please? It's not gonna work, I can't feel it coming.”

“Then the black guy tells me: - listen, I'm gonna have to go away for a year or two, so I'd like for you to draw my daughter's portrait. Me: - You got a daughter?... He looks young. - You don't believe me? Wait up, I'm gonna get her, this way you do her portrait real fast, in a half hour, do me this one favor man, I'm begging you. I'm like: - It's midnight dude, just let your daughter sleep, whatcha going away for anyway? He goes: - Jail man, I fucked up, I'm a wanted man. All of a sudden: - Wait up, I'll be right back. Then he runs off after some chick and is gone in two seconds.”

Another giant billboard: UNE COULEUR APRÈS L'AUTRE. One color after another. Exactly the colors of our car... We had it marbled recently, the engine too, and we had a clear hood put in.

“FadingDreams300! Classy.”

“What about the other one? Fox face? What did he want?”

“A portrait of his wife: - I can't give you any more flowers Chief, I gave too much already, are you gonna do my wife's portrait or what? Come on, I'm begging you! I go: - I dunno. - Wallah, I'm the exact opposite of my buddy, I respect women for real. My wife, I never check out any one else, and neither does she. I beg of you man, draw me her picture, she's the one. Listen, I've got two photos on me: I'll give you one and if you come back to paint in the street, maybe you'll bring the portrait, al 'right? - Fine! I'll do it, give it to me, what's your number? - You couldn't make me any happier, here! And he gives me that damn picture, which I still have and he walks me to the end of the street.”

“You see, when we met, my buddy and I, it was destiny. It was destiny when they send him a hundred kilometers away in that hole where I live, where there's

nothing dude, not even a bar, nobody, it's dead.”

“And that jail business for his buddy, is it for real?”

“Yeah it's for real, and for some bullshit too, the tiniest robbery. They fucked it up and his buddy punched a cop and he ran away, but since he's black and he's the only one in the whole village, they gave the dogs a piece of his clothes and they smelled him out. They found him, but he showed them his daughter, which was a nice trick, they thought it wasn't him. But now he's wanted, and if he gets stopped, it's straight to jail. And then fox face tells me: - But I'll stand by him, I'm not gonna let him down for that just now.”

We're driving over the factories once more. Che is starting to relax, to forget:

“How beautiful this is. If only they could spit out more smoke! I heard it was crazy back in the days, the fog was much denser. And yellow, red, purple! It must have turned people's irises crazy, don't you think?”

“Not without acetone I don't think, you need acetone vapors to turn your irises. See how fast they're going?”

“It's horrible they're dismantling that factory down just for scraps.”

“You know what they should have done? A giant theme park!”

“Or turn'em into nail polish factories, all of them, not just half!”

“Welcome to Charleroi Nails!”

“Nail Art capital!”

Che and Bob recite by heart:

“Charleroi Nails, no work, long nails, painted nails. Charleroi Nails, unemployment capital, cloud interpretation? Long nails and super long nails...”

Night falls. We are driving counterclockwise, on the outside so we can see far away. Another WMP billboard, it takes ages to get past it. SOUFFLEZ SUR L'EAU. Blow on the water. It's the trick to quickly dry the torn top layer of varnish when you've scratched through the marble with your nail. The billboard is signed Tatayoy. It's a minimalistic water marble, a five circled blue and black. It looks like a lot more or a lot less, that's the idea. At ten by fifteen meters, pretty much only Charleroi Nails knows how to do it. For that kind of marbling, you actually don't marble the polish: the nail is dipped beforehand in the first concentric patterns.

“You still ain't doin' any are you? You should try, it might do you some good...”

“They got too many of those billboards. Around the Ring OK, it's beautiful, with many of them, it's beautiful, but the one they've put in front of the train station or in the aeropole, at the arrivals, just like that, all by itself, it's ugly, no? Maybe on the Ring or in the subway stations, it's kinda working'...”

“Why don't you wanna try it? I bet it's because you ain't got no arms...”

“It's boring, you're boring, that's all everyone is doin', water marble, it freaks me out. Even football is gonna disappear if they keep up with it.”

“Why don't you get black and white zebras on your toes if you love football so much... And quit speeding will you? It's been an hour and not a single aura.”

“Che, check out the tanks over there: evening' draining... Red River tonight!”

“Like a warthog, lost in the war, red is the Sambre, my love.”

“And not just *love* red, they're tossing out a whole sunset in the river tonight.”

After the tanks, downstream, parallel rivers of polish are streaming down, ever wider. The river is swarming with people. Most are wearing gas masks. Men standing in dinghies in the middle of the stream busy themselves with long poles to create ripples. They obey the screams of rod-dippers who are fighting on the banks to dip the stuff hanging off their lines near the steerers, where the polish stripes are the most intense and the sharpest. Others, downstream, in their glutinous hulls create zig-zags across the surface of the river while crossing back and forth. This is where the car marbling begins: dozens of shanties are sprawling on the banks, their roofs covered with bodywork bits and pieces; under the bridges and off of the rusty loading cranes, car carcasses drippy with color hang like bats.

“What about the portrait of fox face's wife, did you end up making it?”

“Yep. Pretty damn good too.”

“Did he like it?”

“I kept it. It's a folding portrait you know, sometimes I play with it like a doll.”

“You kept it!”

“Maybe one day I'll show you how to do it. Let me explain. I imitate the flap of a butterfly's wing, slow motion, I open and close the paper gently. It's magical how the face animates when it's folded like a cross, it makes it very realistic. That girl, she got blue eyes, you'll see, all lined with black. I painted them like a girl - I mean like a girl would take care putting makeup on. Pink on the cheeks, clear gloss on the lips, fair strands of hair around her forehead and locks bouncing on her shoulders, it took me a real long time... She's wearing a big black letterman jacket with white sleeves...”

Bob mimes the rest, holding the paper vertically this time; he stands behind it, like a puppeteer, and unfolds the girl extremely slowly. The sheet perks up in the front. Che feels his spine twisting. Now I'm gonna unfold it completely and when it goes *cloc!* you'll turn into a toad!

CHANGEZ L'EAU. Change the water.

Che scans an old flyer lying around the car, crumpled like an old dollar bill. It looks like a relaxation thingy: My nails are growing, three, four millimeters...

then: An imperceptible change. I file my nails one by one, I take care of them. The powder smells good, it is waxy and fluffy. I remember digging my nails into a cuttlefish bone. This is how it ends: I've got ten nails. I take care of them always. My fingers now have a little beak, which I'm learning to use. Ten little birds' heads, bird puppets, all lined up, inseparable. An eagle on the thumb, a swan on the index, a parrot on the middle finger, a duck on my ring finger an owl on my pinky finger. On the other hand, an ostrich, a jet, a crow, a stork, a sparrow. I close my eyes, and when I join my hands, I try to picture all the birds meeting at the same time.

“Where did you find this?”

“At Yagalala. I woulda loved to snatch a poster. I got you a poem. Arthur Rimbaud, it was on the Library door, they printed it right on it, listen: Into the Green Inn: I asked for some slices of bread and butter, the waitress had enormous breasts, Rimbaud holes-in-his-boots outside the rain was fine..., I can't remember what's next... All right, let's go get Cyndi at the WMP. You're not even trippin' anyway...”

“Ah! I see you're interested!”

“Watermarble? Hell no! Anyway I don't even get why there are millions of tutorials on it online. One good tutorial would be enough right? To teach the whole world once and for all!”

“Wow, that's a lame argument! It's art Bob. Each tutorial is a piece of art.”

“Well it's a cult anyway, \_people are sinking all their money into that thing: Computer, 3D webcam, vacuum table, decorations, the polishes...”

“At the WMP the polishes are freebees, Bob. Courtesy of the factories.”

“Junkies, Che! How many hours a day does Cyndi spend there?”

“But Cyndi is almost a star! You know how many subscribers he's got? I dare you to tell me you don't like his tutorials.”

“Hello guys! Today we're gonna work on a three color watermarble yada yada yada...”

When he played football he was a star too, Che. Poor Axel! Last thing we need is for him to turn bird...”

“Bob!”

“What?”

“Your portrait, tell me you believe it's the girl from the bridge, that's what you think right?”

“Come on Che, not that old story again!”

*“On the parking lot by the bridge, as night was falling, cars saw a blue pick-up truck pull up and a fire light up in the wet leaves covering the ground and vodka spraying on the trees and on the lips of the sand from the construction site...”*

“What a bore! Let's roll till' ten OK? Then let's go get Cyndi.”

Another billboard; orange. TAPEZ LE GOBELET. Tap the bucket. Orange on orange background: a conceptual joke from OrangeOrange, who only uses orange

polish bottles of different shapes for her marbles. She hit the big time with that concept.

City Twelve's dusty terrace rooftops parade bellow the Ring: fucked up furniture, old laundry, scattered lumber, masonry rubble, broken toilets, rabbit cages...

“To think that one day, they had mad gardens here, terraces everywhere, and crazy ass green hanging gardens!”

Bob slows down suddenly. The setting sun is flashing right in his face. He gets passed on the right by a truck from Tomato Terril, red, green and white, with a macaque face on the door. Bob recognizes Ngu's truck, coming back empty from the south of France. Superdipping deluxe... He must know someone at the tanks to afford such wide stripes. Ngu's face is a constellation of little mounds that seem to have been there since before his nose, before his eyes and everything else. One night in a bar, Ngu told the story of Tom, his monkey, and Bob remembers thinking the little mounds of flesh were imprisoned tears.

“You sleeping or what? I'd like to fix if you don't mind, so drive please!”

Black Billboard. Lights are off. Backlit on top of that. The message is illegible.

“Christopher...”

“You say *Chrostopher* in English...”

Che and Bob are in love with Christopher, a nineteen year old crew in a hoodie, covered in zits, his nails super long and dirty. He plays guitar downtown and has a castrato voice.

“I drew a picture of his feet, one day when he was singing in the street. He was very nice, he didn't move a bit, even between songs. He would sing anything: O Sole mio! And stupid pseudo English stuff. The clerk from the store across the street was going mad, he was getting headaches, he couldn't stand his voice.”

“By the way, do you know that Christopher Reeves wanted to become a guitar player and not an actor? A guy told him: you're gonna play Superman. But he didn't want to. All he wanted to do was play guitar. The guy was like: Take it or leave it.”

“The clerk kept coming back to kick us out. We'd say OK OK, we're goin', but we stayed, because the drawing was taking a long time... Then the guy came one more time and Christopher didn't answer back to him. He turned to me quietly and said: - This guy doesn't understand. He's talking to me, like that, but I'll slit his throat. - With your sword? I ask, kidding around. - No, with this, he says, showing his nails.”

“I'm not surprised. I bet you didn't even know that when he was a kid, between

five and ten, he was an opera singer.”

“Yeah, I know, he earned ten thousand euros every three months, and almost no expenses, room and board in Paris. His mom bought a house with that money.”

“It was tough, he had a hard time at the opera, but still, he did it for five years. Then he got twisted, his mom put him in the psych ward.”

“Still, he managed to get out, I bet you don't even know how.”

“Nope.”

“Well, with... They were gonna... right, he...”

“Come on man...”

Bob's in his turns, is fixing the river that crosses the whole town at the bottom of a concrete corridor. Che dreams of Tarzan, the famous Tarzan of Charleroi, before the nails, who went down the river half naked on a zodiac in the seventies. “There were fun times, in the good old days of the steel mills, thought Che. I heard he had his own cabaret with transvestites. It was a hit. They had so many workers. Too bad I'll never see a blast furnace at work. Molten steel just rolls, it must create such marble... Benito knew Tarzan as a kid; he said he was nice. It's been a while since I've seen Benito's Cadillac on the Ring. Or the safari minibus, or Crazy Horse's Saab; It's been a while since we last saw the little train...”

“It's coming back to me now: Christopher ran away from the ward before his injection.”

“There you go, there were three of 'em trying to bind him down, arms along the body, crossed forearms. His wrists in ... in pigskin bracelets.”

“Then the three nurses went in the other room, to fix the GHDBD. Meanwhile, Christopher chewed off the leather with his teeth and by stretching his neck to the max, he managed to free an arm before they came back to give him his shot. Bam! Christopher threw his arm out and his square fist, right in the face of that nazi with his syringe. His brow went scrotack! Then Christopher pulled out his nails and shoved them right in that guy's neck carotid through the asshole's starchy uniform. Coming around with the other hand, he grabbed his chin: scratch! scratch! He screwed his neck off twice. And the nurse went down.”

It's time to go get Cyndi. Bob takes the exit towards the WMP. A giant beetle is abuzz in the cockpit, its body reads: *Deon no head*. Once we get to the WMP's we feel like eating first. La Quille is closed so we go down to the plaza to grab a Kebab. The plaza is packed, so we park near the Marsupilami, in front of the maternity ward. - Nobody ever saw the tip of that damn Marsupilami's tail, I bet they've got it up in a bunch -, then we walk down and cross the plaza again.

“We're in the middle of the festival, no wonder we can't park.”

“This year, Detruire.be put marbles on the nails.”

Che is talking about square nails, the size of car hoods mounted on the three giant iron hands on the round-about. With multicolored lasers, the hands are dancing, stretching up to the sky like under a basketball hoop.

“Those are the hands of coal miners, they used to dig under the earth...”

FAITES LE GOUTTER AU CENTRE. Drop in the middle. Red and white croco marble on a giant billboard in front of the WMP. Crocodaïle from the Naïle...

Che is sensitive to the thinner, and before entering the hangar, he's already squinting. Bob preferred to wait outside. Every time he walks by Hall 2's giant metal door, he tries to calculate how many days it's been open for. 3000? 4000? How long has Cyndi worked there? Above the booths, the carpets of bottles of polish are still. And I still don't know the number of his aisle. But by observing the bubbles in the water dispenser, Che can tell the booths that are working. He looks up, in the mass of clear nozzles dangling from the ceiling. Not exactly sure, he goes up aisle 15, in the sound and the light of the few computers that are still on. Nobody. It's quite convenient for snooping. The instructors get their videos to start loading before taking off. That's how he met Cyndi, he had a crush on an uploading tutorial. Che is looking for a booth that's black and blue on the inside, with butterfly shaped saloon doors. I hope he's done... He's expecting to find Cyndi hunched over his light table, his back in the shadows.

“Hi Che.”

“You coming? We're waiting for you.”

“Ok, let me clean up.”

Cyndi rolls back his office chair, leaving his ten circled marble in the cup on the table. Near the edge are his favorite colors: blue, black, orange, then, near the center, the beginning of his message: a long slab of neon yellow, then three thin circles: Raspberry, plain yellow and brown.

“Can you guess what's next?”

Ass still on the chair, clicking on his stats with each turn, Cyndi cleans up his vials, empties the thinner, throws out the napkins and turns off the light table.

“The Austrians like it! You know what I scored today?”

“Come on Cyndi, my eyes are itchy...”

“Whatever! I've got the cleanest air in the whole WMP.”

Che squints in the dark. Cyndi just shut everything off: the blue wall, the neons, the vent.

Translated by Jean Barberis.  
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