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Where does the category of “character” end? Where does the category of “truth” begin?

A man with an amputated right arm floats in the basin of the fountain in Place d’Espagne, Brussels, close to the Galeries Saint-Hubert. With his stump sticking out of the water and his face half-submerged, he is having trouble breathing.

All this time, no passerby has thought it wise to save this man who’s obviously in bad shape. Besides, why save a character? It’s pointless. For several minutes, the patched-up character continues to survive despite appearances. The strangest aspect of the whole thing is that no onlooker has got it wrong: he is in fact a character. So all bets are off.

Except a nice Russian couple, musicians. The man plays a handmade double bass, fashioned out of a long string attached to the centre of a metal basin and held taut with a broomstick, while his green-skirted companion applies herself to an accordion.

Coming out of the Galeries Saint-Hubert, Jokey Smurf passes them. Motivated by the prospect of catching more prey, he holds out an entirely new present to the bass player. The street artist, guileless, friendly and pleased by the gift, nods in assent, accepts and starts to open the surprise. The Smurf steps back, as can be expected. A tremendous flash followed by a long plume of white and blue smoke envelopes the wretch who, considering the violence of the shock, is grimacing and hardly laughing. His companion reacts at once. She pitches her accordion at the Smurf’s head, still within reach. Misunderstanding hovers. The blue character falls unconscious on the cobblestones. Smoke-man continues to bat at the air around him. He paddles with his arms, as if he’s trying to get out of an asphyxiating tunnel in a serious fire. When he realizes that only one of his arms is responding, he almost panics, but then he too prefers to lose consciousness. Another one-armed man is added to our story. What’s more, he too has lost his right arm.

It’s at this point that the troop of literary tourists intervenes. For the first time, all the members of the gang, who haven’t necessarily read the book but who have followed, with guide and road maps, our hero’s adventures, show up on the scene. The guide suggests to his group to go assess the state of the main character in the fountain. A moustached rebel, who has paid for his “tourist for a few chapters” pass like all the other members of the package tour, reacts to this decision, effectively stealing the floor from the guide.

— I’m sure that the main character’s stump should have grown back. It’s not in the brochure, but you can bet your ass there’s been some negligence in the writing of this scene.

Arriving at the fountain and leaning over the main character’s body, the moustached guy apprehends that the former is still alive, but getting weaker by the minute. His illusions are shattered. He touches the healthy arm lying in the water and the bloody stump, which is in a

bad state and continues to taunt him. There is no new right arm just like there is no permutation of arms. Everything is in place in the best of all worlds.

— Two right arm stumps, it's very disappointing. I want my money back.

The other tourists remind him that the information given was undoubtedly sound and that, anyway, soon they will all receive a new edition of this famous map of future narrative events. Everyone is hungry. The guide takes the opportunity to announce a free hour. The malcontent invites his comrades to the first waffle stand they can find. He wants to apologize by treating everyone to waffles. A lout but generous all the same. Apart from two people, one frustrated, the other resting, the rest of the group is salivating in anticipation of the crunchy-soft goodness of this tasty concoction. Very few people take action, and that's where the drama lies, but also the comedy.

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In the main character's skull there is also action.

(In the background can be heard the constant sound of water weakly lapping in the fountain.)

*So... honestly, why am I sulking in gloom when I should be extricating myself from the fountain (mouth noises) my legs are out cold... my working arm prefers to float (violent mouth noises) it's not going well... yeah, yeah, I'm hanging on... we can't get rid of this natural passage... good old holes that press us and test us... and... what... I could've died squashed by an elephant, crushed in a garbage truck, suffocated by a pretzel, poisoned by a bay leaf, struck down by a heart attack in a bus at rush hour... this doesn't make me feel better... not at all... got to be consistent... we plasticize, download, digitize, modernize, we clean better, heal faster, we do everything faster, but no one has figured out how to patch up the hole of the living... the vast infinite hole into which we all fall... I mean the hole that, joined end to end with others' holes since the beginning of time, forms an infinite tunnel, a dark labyrinth, from which we all spring up, wherever we can, wherever there's copulation, in other words everywhere, and then... but what is... what is this (prolonged mouth noises)... what do they have to laugh about, these dandified flâneurs... I wonder... my nose tells me I'm alive... I struggle for my nose... brave slender bellhops in front of the flooded hotel... they look me over... an agitated moustached guy leans over me... the little shit is worried... these idiots are always worried... they don't wait... they want us immediately within their reach... they spring up out of nowhere to gut us with whatever shovel is on hand... as soon as it suits their next idiocy... I feel sorry for him... he looked thoroughly disappointed... thoroughly... but who's going to get me out of here... once and for all... really (mouth noises) I feel some tingling in my legs... my arms... it's coming back... one small step... one small dry step.*

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Those less inclined to understand are always the most in a hurry to act.

In short, bored with the lack of events happening in their news box, the troop of literary tourists returned to the crime scene. An elderly literary tourist, kinder than the others,

disapproved of leaving a character, even if only a paper animal, to face a symbolic certain death in a public fountain.

With aplomb that spurred his pupils into action (his job compels him to develop a kind of educational tenderness for his tourists), the guide took charge of the big manoeuvres. Promptly, he chose four beefy guys, including the moustached hothead, to go find a stretcher at the Factory of Realistic Objects office. They returned successful from their expedition. The four scoundrels were now ready to carry out their mission: extract the main character from the fountain in Place d'Espagne.

Which was accomplished in no time. They laid him on the ground, then gave him new clothes.

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All my limbs are reacting to my nerves. I'm feeling much better. I'm dry. I'm well. Took the time to thank the empathetic crowd around me. I notice the fool with the moustache who seems to have chosen a much more deserving position by keeping back from the action.

In front of the Galeries Saint-Hubert (I suddenly recognize the place), the Smurf, squatting down, rubs his head, then re-dons his white hat while an ambulance gobbles up the musician who refuses to let go of his strange double bass until a paramedic tears it out of his hand, and who, incidentally, is also missing the right arm. The coincidence upsets me, but what can I do about it? His companion, in tears, goes to sit beside him in the ambulance. She gives the Smurf an indignant look. It doesn't react. Once again, the Smurf made someone the butt of a joke; of course, he's programmed for it, a knee-jerk reaction. What's more, the mechanics of his actions are so pitiful that people should start to watch out. But we persist, I don't really know why, in giving him more attention than he deserves. The police don't come, because the police never lift a finger to lock up a character. Characters have the good life, and I'm not complaining because I'm part of their ridiculous Aeropagus.

Through careful consideration, I have calmly learned how to become a character. It demands constant application. I wasn't a character at the beginning of this book but I have become one.

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