Translated from French

FALSE START AND FALSE FINISH

Jérôme Eeckhout

Lately, Hubert-le-Fier, lord of Mortelune, is bored in his castle. To distract himself, he decides to organise a race across his vast estate. There's nothing more exciting than a few young men riding together! But what should the reward be? A piece of land? A horse? A purse of gold coins? All these he hold dear. Come on, I have six daughters, the eldest of whom, Jehane, must be old enough to get married. That's our trophy! Dame Aremberge, his wife, wants to protest. Hubert brushed aside her arguments: if Jehane doesn't agree, I'll have her head shaved and send her to a convent.

Three valiant knights were selected: Arthaud-le-Hardi, Brunon-le-Pieux and Conrad-le-Brave. For a laugh, Hubert wanted to add a fourth candidate, a beggar. We'll say that the lord is opening up to the peasants, when, in truth, it's just a matter of being mocked. In the backyards of the castle a guard finds a skinny stable boy called Folquet.
- Put down your dung shovel and follow me!
the soldier orders.

When the day comes, the three gentlemen lead their beautiful horses to the starting line. Folquet joins them, mounted on a shaggy donkey.
When the trumpeters raise their instruments, the donkey takes fright. Without waiting for the music, it bolts down the path. Immediately, the crowd jeers at the cheater who dared to make this blatant false start. They scream. Insults were hurled. They demand justice. Hubert laughs a lot. He orders them to let him go. The trumpets sound. The three valiant men set off and, very quickly, catch up with the pipsqueak.

Arthaud-le-Hardi takes the lead. In the forest of Songecreux, he spots a wolf. Overwhelmed by the idea of killing the wolf, he draws his sword, dismounts his horse and rushes towards the beast. Two metres from the motionless wolf, Arthaud's foot hits a trap whose sharp fangs close on his ankle. His cry of pain echoes all the way to the castle.

Brunon-le-Pieux is leading the race. In the middle of the Devil's Hole, a maze of dark caves, he sees a grimacing spectre. The devil himself! Terrified, he runs away screaming like a piglet. In one fell swoop, he gives up the test, goes home, changes his knickers and left the country.

Conrad-the-Brave, now in first place, rushes into the Beaupré marshes. He meets a peasant woman and asks her for the safest route through these marshes. A kilometre further on, his horse gets stuck in the thick mud that keeps them prisoners.

Folquet is the last to go. Suddenly, two armed bandits appear on the path. The first orders him to get off his donkey, the second to undress.

Behind the drawbridge, the crowd is shouting like never before when the crowd spots Folquet on his donkey, a large hood hiding his face. The dreadful cheat! The redneck of the false start! He dares to claim victory? The women want him to be hang. The men suggest by the feet. Surrounded by the guards, the figure takes off his hood. And, surprise! It's not Folquet, but the youngest daughter.
- It would seem, she said, amused, that no one will marry Jehane.

An hour later, the six sisters were gathered in the great hall: the first was covered with a wolf's skin, the second wears a hideous mask, the third is dressed as a peasant woman and the next two as bandits. Jehane is wearing nothing special, apart from a boastful smile.

Hubert-le-Fier gets red in the face. They ruined his great event! After much swearing and spitting, the lord spits out his favourite threat: if it goes on like this, they'll be shaved and off to the convent.
Dame Aremberge intervenes.
- Come on, my good husband, there's no need to be snippy! None of our daughters will shave neither the walls or their hair. You wanted a race to exalt the qualities of body, will and spirit? Admit that these girls are the ones who have served you best!

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ONE AND THE OTHER

Bernard Chambaz

These are my legs.
They are the best of me. From a certain point of view, it's sad to say, because it suggests that the rest is significantly less good. And yet, when I look at them today, my legs, they don't look like much. I've got big thighs that I owe to the balloons and tubes of the concentrated milk of yesteryear and, as I've got older, the skin gets wrinklier and wrinklier. However, they're the ones that carry me, the ones I can count on to carry me, until when? The other day, I ran to the bus to catch it just as it was about to leave again, and the driver said to me: You've got some nice leftovers! Despite the blunt judgement about my appearance, I took it as a compliment. But the cold shower didn't take long. A young woman got up from her seat to give me her place. I thanked her and, with a smile on my face, refused. I have no illusions about what she might have thought. The only advantage is that this warning shot pushed me to straighten up to look the part.
It's true that I like my legs, despite everything, and that I owe them a lot. They're slightly marked and, if I'm in a good mood, I can always compare myself to a cowboy.
I know, it's not a comparison that many people dream of, but sometimes you have to make do with what you have. There was a time when I could even run quite fast in them. Those were the days. The days of leniency, one might believe, were in the past. They never went very fast anyway. But they did support me in cup matches with extra time, for matches in five sets, for five thousand meters of altitude difference by bike, for marathons, for miles and miles of walking in the heart and on the fringes of metropolises on every continent Occasionally, I look at the legs of champions. Usain Bolt's legs, which have been the talk of the town, not least because they go so fast. Michaël Jordan's legs, which are very long, N'Golo Kanté's legs, which are much smaller, Julian Alaphilippe's legs, which look like nothing at all, my cycling friends' legs, which look like Alaphilippe's legs, Marie-José Perec's legs, which would have delighted the film-maker François Truffaut.
Propriety would dictate that we sign up for the marathon ‘for all’ at the Paris Olympics, which should welcome as many women's legs as men's and which will make a U-turn in front of the Château de Versailles, that's just the way it is. Frankly, with or without fireworks, I'd rather discover the Honolulu marathon. Not for the views of the lagoons on one side and the craters of the volcanoes on the other, nor for the flower necklace or the finisher's jersey, but to honour the memory of my old comrade Jack London, sitting on the swing of his veranda, feet fanning out, dressed only in a raffia skirt, writing dazzlingly light-hearted letters to his daughters.

Among the synonyms, I have a particular fondness for pencils and begonias. That said, the legs would be nothing without the feet that hold everything together. No matter what you say, they give us the joy of leaping and bounding. ‘My mind won't move if my legs don't move it’: Montaigne, a seasoned cowboy, summed up the subject perfectly. There's something delightful about this observation, which Prévert took up again in his house that wasn't his house, ‘with red chillies hanging on the white walls’. So, yes, just for those red chillies hanging on the white walls, we're ready to run ‘with all our legs’ like the heroes from the Iliad and see for ourselves that ‘feet are very clever’. It's all very well and good. But anyone who has run for real, for long enough, knows that feet and legs are not enough, nor is the heart, without what gives us the drive to go further and further, an indefatigable mental strength.