

THE HATCHLING

Well, I must be dead!

A violent white light illuminates me, bathing the surrounding space. Soft yet harsh, smooth and enveloping. It is exactly what one would expect from eternity. I am regaining my senses, growing lucid. There is indeed a life after life... With all the risks I have been taking in my escalations and in many other parts of my life, my continuous gambling with death, I am frankly not particularly amazed to be here. I had always worked towards perfecting my solitary escalations, climbing up rock faces without ropes or safety mechanisms. I preferred to spurn the pollution of the safety net and experience the climb in its naked form. In this dangerous game I had striven to be the best. I had many escapades and had become a world record holder in a tough, extreme, but exquisitely benevolent sport. It brought me sublime moments, beyond time, beyond compare.

And now my posthumous life has begun! I think about the idea. Spiritually alive, I can appreciate my mortal end. If only I had known...

Being killed in a car accident would have left me with many regrets. God, none of us really ever have the death we truly deserve or yearn for. Barely any of us leave this world with honour, after a glorious battle – merely with the deflation of an end to an unspectacular everyday life, humdrum, flat and without zest. And we can only really be measured by the people who miss us. Me? I leave a wife, Nicole; three children, Julien, Hugo and Lucas; and some dear friends...

Fucking light!

Now it blinds me, irritates me, tortures me... This is purgatory perhaps... I also deserve this. For almost 35 years I have been pushing it. My death will be a personal tragedy for my parents – people without history, smooth and settled, too respectful of the established rules to leave any room for dreams. I was by contrast a turbulent child, a reckless person, ceaselessly

tormented and driven by the spirit of adventure. A mother's heartbreaker, able at the tender age of 12 to climb seven floors of the building in which we lived. What made me do it? Well, it was always there and it had to emerge.

There are drives within us, predeterminations against which we cannot fight. Is there a gene which compels some of us to escalate vertical rock faces? Who knows what is hidden in our endless coils of DNA. But it was not evident in my parents, that's for sure.

Back then I didn't hesitate before climbing our housing block. I had baptised it the Cold Wing after one of the mythical summits of the massif in the mountainous National Park of Ecrin. Looking back, I believe that impish act was my fate. As a 12-year-old boy I had returned from school and patted my pockets to discover I had lost my keys and was locked out. But I knew that the window of our loggia seven floors up was never locked. There was an obvious solution to this dilemma. Let's climb up there! So up I climbed, floor by floor, until I was home. When my parents got in they were annoyed with me – the concierge had witnessed my break-in and reported me to them. I was in the doghouse for a while, my mother angry with me, not so much for climbing the building, but more for annoying the concierge who was less than amused by my mischief. I felt that my father, with whom I did not often speak much, looked at me in a different way from that day.

What had sparked this life-changing decision? Back in my childhood, climbing literature was hard to come by. I had discovered climbing through epic stories of famous climbers risking their lives to conquer great heights, tales which made my eyes redden each evening by the light of my bedside lamp. The heroism of these alpinists generated in me this imperious need to conquer, to overcome rationality until the irrational led me towards my dream of escalation. As a nine-year-old my inspiration was fired by a movie I had watched about an airplane which crashed near the summit of one of Europe's highest mountains. A pair of brothers, both top climbers, had decided to scale the huge and vertical mountain to see if there were any survivors. They intrepidly scaled the rock faces and battled the elements. It had everything I loved – they were courageous heroes and they were overcoming the odds and rescuing people in dire circumstances! From then on, I wanted to be a climber. Like all kids I wanted to be brave in the manner of Zorro or Robin Hood and climbing seemed to offer me that.

The blinding light loses its brightness. There's a shape. A soul. A person. Somebody bends over me. A voice.

"He's awake!"

Awake? It all sounds very earthly. This is the afterlife? Don't tell me it's the same old story about following rules, respecting schedules and speed limits... I really can't believe it. Are there rules in heaven? When I was alive, I fought a lonely battle against the politically correct – not being an individualist but simply a defender of our freedom to assume our own choices, to undertake without limitations the paths that we decide to follow. After passing over to the other side I will not allow someone to dictate the hour at which I have to get up! Heaven is a huge let-down. The voice, female, probes me for a reaction.

"Are you okay?"

The world around me gently emerges. I feel I am in an enclosure. A room? Light streaks through the room in glowing slices through a blind's narrow strips. On the right, a door. Above me, lengths of tubes, flasks and... a cobweb? It looks pretty weird for paradise... then it sinks in. It is not my time yet. Am I really alive? It sure looks like it. Apparently, I have to postpone my death... This is good news! But I am immediately scared. In what physical condition will I have to spend the rest of my life? The nurse bends more, touches my cheek, then says to me, smiling:

"We shall take care of the nose later! The surgeon has already spent more than five hours on your case."

How long have I been out of it? Hours? Days? I know that in the morning I had set off to Grenoble, something like that, but then there's a blank. With my nasty habit of not buckling my safety belt I must have smashed through the windscreen and broken my protruding proboscis yet again. I don't really care about that. I peer down and look over my broken body. I am much more afraid for my wrists, which were already little more than a fused bunch of crumbs. New fractures would surely reduce them to incapacity. Given the size of the plaster cast which entombs one of my arms, I am terrified. The nurse reassures me: my wrist is indeed broken but luckily it snapped cleanly and without the osseous explosion I had feared. The fracture, apparently, is precise, as if it had been cut by laser; and once I have recovered I shall not have any remaining after-effects. So much the better, I already have enough of those.

I search my memory, hunting for any recollections that could explain

how I ended up here. I strain but find no thread of the accident.

“Is the car destroyed?” I ask the nurse as she leaves the room. I guess the impact must have been terrible. A truck... or a tree? Yes, for sure, a tree. She half-turns and responds as she leaves the room.

“What car are you talking about?”

What does she mean? No car accident? If not – then what happened? I try to remember something, anything, but there is nothing except confusion and an overwhelming, stifling fear. I want to fall asleep again, to sink straight into the oblivion of unconsciousness.

Later on, the surgeon strides in, flicking through his charts. Although my mind is hazy I recognise him immediately. Dr Gérard Hoël is the man I can thank for putting me back together several times. We know each other well and I dare to ask him the truth. The uncertainty has been unbearable. I like to know where I have been when I wake up and I also like controlling the movements of my body. Having my memory kidnapped and getting it back in this condition drives me insane.

The good doctor smiles. The truth? There was no car accident. They found me at the bottom of a cliff, unconscious, poly-traumatised. The truth hurts more than my injuries. In 20 years of climbing, thousands of solo adventures including masterpieces among the northern faces of the Alps, I never had the slightest accident. Yes, I have fallen before from ropes, but never when climbing solo, climbing unaided with my bare hands. To discover that I had fallen solo is greatly disturbing. And to find myself so injured is also very worrying. Not that I am not used to it by now. I have had numerous nose-breaking minor falls and some hospitalising medium ones. This is 1993, the third time I have been badly hurt, the third time my bones have been severely broken, cracked, smashed.

Have you ever heard the sound of a falling body? It is unbelievable, a paroxysmal violence. It is absolutely incredible that a human being can overcome such trauma. I must admit that I have never heard any of my own falls. I only remember an endlessly long plunge – and then darkness. In those few seconds, memories rush into your mind, especially the good old ones, the ones you hang onto in life, the ones that condition you subconsciously to survive. But you need luck too: a lucky fall means life, an unlucky one means death or worse.

My wife Nicole, sat by the bed, recites the inventory of my fractures as if she were the French poet Jacques Prevert (the great Monsieur Prevert,

not Pervert) while I stare at the ceiling. Nicole has seen me in this state before. In fact we first met when I was hobbling around in plaster from another bad fall. This time, my right kneecap, my nose and my left wrist are broken and the bone located under the cheek is totally ruined. It has been suggested to me plenty of times to undergo plastic surgery to salvage my long-suffering nose. Sponsors had even offered to pay for the operation. But after four successive nasal fractures, I knew a fifth one would occur, then maybe a few more. My nose, so often a crumple zone for my brain, is a lost cause. Moreover, with my wrists long since wrecked, I cannot absorb any more than a minor fall with my arms. That goes without saying. My face proves it.

Two guys enter the room. I have no idea who they are and guess they have wandered in by mistake. But it seems like they know me and they appear rather satisfied to discover that I am still alive. Embarrassed at my blank expression they stutter a few incomprehensible words before Nicole interjects at this awkward moment and explains. It is a rather silly tale.

Earlier that fateful morning, these two lads had contacted me for a climbing session. Teaching represents only a small part of my activities but I like sharing my passion with those who feel that same drive and attraction to verticality. We had gone to Cornas, in the vicinity of Valence, a beautiful compact limestone blade lined with nicely spaced modern hooks, but a temporary ban had prevented us from scaling it. Due to the ban that day it was impossible to appreciate the place where I had pursued my first extreme moves. Never mind, I thought, there are plenty of pebbles around Valence. So I searched for another cliff suitable for beginners. I knew a good one, though it had not been a particularly lucky cliff for me. It had gone pretty much unused since the advent of modern climbing and seemed to fit our modest needs perfectly. Its ways and passages were easy and offered little of interest to me as an experienced climber, so this was the first time I had returned for about 11 years. But it was there on this beginner's cliff, on September 29th 1982, that I had my second accident. For a long time, I held a grudge against my fears. But time has passed inexorably and I was no longer afraid of crossing this paved limestone which had given me a hard time years ago...

My decision to climb feels natural and logical. I glance upward to where the anchors of my abseil gave way 11 years before. The cliff rises 20 metres from the ground, just six or seven storeys high, a piffling insignificance in

comparison with the Verdon canyon – but it would be unwise to dismiss such a height out of hand. Ask my nose!

Height is indeed a relative thing, but beyond a certain point Newton's laws of gravity have little meaning. Death is the only constant. This holds true anywhere and at any time, apart from perhaps the odd miracle. During the Second World War an American pilot encountered the most incredible fortune when he walked away totally unscathed after a fall of more than 5000 metres. But another pilot was killed by slipping and landing on a patch of ice. Between these two extremes there is room for some logic: beyond ten metres, generally a fall proves fatal. Just ten metres! The human body can be a fragile thing. Remember to treat height with respect, because falling – whether it be down the stairs or out a window, or off a ladder whilst tending to the roof – is the second highest cause of accidental death after motor accidents.

The cliff is visible now. For a few minutes, while I am approaching the perfect place for this first lesson, images I had managed to evacuate from my memory surface again. I get flickers and flashes of that second accident, the one which should have killed me and almost ended my career. I remain silent, incapable of starting a semblance of a conversation with my students. For sure, they must have been upset by this silence, this distance, this stoic behaviour which most people would reasonably assume was either rudeness or meditation. Right now I keep my thoughts to myself and bury my demons. I cannot worry about pleasantries and I certainly do not think it is a good idea to tell them the truth. Quietly we arrive at the foot of the cliff. The guys take in the cliff in good spirits. I keep it positive though sober.

“Some consider climbing to be a dreadful activity,” I explain, “Dangerous and complex. But climbing is a complete sport. Maybe the most complete one. The whole body works – fingers, arms, back muscles, abdominal muscles, calves, thighs. Flexibility plays an essential role by helping the body to stay stuck against the cliff and by exploiting the features of the rock. The mind is crucial, as the prospect of falling is part of a rock climber's everyday life. You can be in fantastic shape physically but you will fail as a climber if your mind is not focussed and resilient.”

The students nod enthusiastically. I tell them that the main thing about climbing is to learn how to lighten your weight by using your legs as much as possible.

“Arm muscles will never have the power of the calves or thighs! The beginner concentrates on hand grips and quickly becomes exhausted by the effort. Never pull on the arms, but push on the legs.”

Next I jump from theory to practice, and gaily demonstrate by climbing the first few metres of a nice and easy ascent, hands clasped behind my back. It's a happy visual demonstration of the truthfulness of my expert comments. The students listen attentively. But I decide to keep going, climbing a near-vertical cliff with my hands behind me as if I was climbing the stairs in relaxed contemplation. Why did I go further? I still wonder why. Might it have been my attraction to risk, as this has always guided my life? Was I just showing off? Was I trying to mock the cliff that had almost killed me ten years before?

I cheerfully ascend to eight metres with my hands behind me, giving tips and explaining to them that this is the way it should be done.

“Because of the muscle structure,” I state with authority, “pushing with your feet allows you to save energy, but the use of the hands is of course indispensable for balance...”

And then I fall, before the horrified eyes of my pupils.

My third accident had occurred in exactly the same place as my second one – the same fucking place! And once again I find myself broken and comatose in a hospital bed. Once more I awake groggily to a world I have little right to see. And for the second time, Dr Hoël bleakly predicts that for me, climbing belongs henceforth to the past.

I cannot help but muse at this *déjà vu*. Apparently the initial news the nurse gave me was referring to the fact I could keep my forearm. I nearly lost my hand ten years ago and was told then that further damage could result in me losing it. But the surgeon tells me that although its function is further reduced I will be able to use it again for basic everyday purposes. My other fractures should be fine apart from my knee. My knee, which already had a metal plate in it, is also badly broken and will cause me problems. He pulls out my X-rays and points with his pen to the permanent and very obvious damage done. The injuries I carried from my previous two accidents have been exposed by this fall and the prognosis is grim. He tells me that with these injuries I will not be able to exert the strength or the mobility I will need to climb again. He reminds me though that I am lucky to have emerged from my second coma.

I ask him if there is any chance that I might overcome these disabilities.

He shakes his head and frowns sympathetically. More modest movements are possible, he tells me, and he is pleased with the results of the surgery considering what he had to work with when I was brought in. This man knows his stuff, but deep inside, I know that I will get up and I will climb again. It would have been easy to believe Dr Hoël, as it takes weeks to get out of hospital. But for me, getting back to the mountains is a matter of survival. I was condemned to being pinned to the ground once before and I managed to get back to my beautiful cliffs.

In retrospect, I realise that my stays at the hospital have always been the turning point of a new start. When faced with an end to my dreams I drew upon the deepest depths of my soul and summoned the motivation to go further, to dare to take on new and seemingly impossible challenges. Every time I have limped out of hospital I have been a little more handicapped but also a little more determined. In France we have a card which registers your disability and attributes a figure to reflect this. My rating is a so-called 66 percent incapacity. I have disabilities, and limited movement due to my permanent injuries, plus feelings of dizziness from time to time. Technically I am disabled but I do not receive a disability pension from the state. For some reason officials have difficulty in understanding that the handicapped person I am and the Spiderman they see on TV is the same guy... I suppose I can understand that. And actually, I prefer this pension to be left for those who are unable to move even out of a chair. I am fortunate in that I can continue to seize the day and have fun, to continue to surmount this 66 percent misfortune.

Various friends come and visit me and horse around in the ward. Some assume I will quit climbing this time, given the prognosis, but also as a consequence of the emotional trauma of such a close shave. People often ask me why I continue, whether I have a death wish. I don't, I just love climbing. It's what I do and what I live for. It's my life.

It was always in my blood, even as a child. For a long time my favourite cliffs were made of leaves. My playground? Three sturdy trees which flanked our neighbours' houses. My friends and I climbed and clambered their craggy branches every day. We would go as high and as far as the branches would allow, sometimes sagging or bending to breaking point. We had even set up a Tyrolean traverse – that is, a pair of horizontal ropes between two high fixed points – thanks to the surplus in speleological equipment belonging to my friend's potholing father. Happiness then was