

SOMBERMAN'S ACTIE

Remco Campert

fragmentvertaling van Donald Gardner

dgardner@xs4all.nl

bladzijden 5-13 (het begin van het boek)

Something is beginning, things are happening to Somberman.

He is in a landscape somewhere and at the same time he's imagining it – heather, birch trees and broom; narrow winding paths and fine greyish sand. He is experiencing the idle timelessness of an August afternoon and with this sensation, he is floating in the realm between sleep and being awake. Everything is smiling. People are carrying him in their arms, and he thinks if only I could hold onto this moment, but immediately the picture starts to fray. It is like a beautiful, but faded piece of cloth, deliberately or carelessly maltreated and the last he sees of this panorama is the stump of a dead branch on the hot grey sand, bleached by wind and weather – a tree-bone. The arms that are carrying him drop, the smile evaporates and Somberman comes to himself, wide awake in his bed at eleven o'clock on a weekday morning – let's say a Tuesday, then we have most of the week still to go.

Not that the day of the week matters much to Somberman since he attained the status of unemployed white-collar worker. What hour it is also counts for less and less. Boundaries have been effectively erased; they're marked only by this brief transition between dreaming and waking and even this gets blurred. Obviously, things happen to him during the daylight hours that are different from those that occur in the night, but the significance of these events appears to him equally great or small, if importance is something one can measure.

Every day, to lend a notion of order to his existence, he draws a line on a sheet of paper next to his bed, once he has made sure that he is awake; often this is his only transaction of the day. He does it now too; the one hundred and fifty-sixth day of his unemployment has begun. No reason to hang out a flag. He goes and lies down again and tries to summon up the cosy picture that deserted him just a minute, ago. But nothing remains of it, apart from the memory of something safe and warm and the idea that it made sense.

'Nothing is certain,' he starts his daily debate with himself, often out loud. That's another thing – if he stops talking, he will soon cease to belong to the human race. Words can rescue him. But from what? Right, give us an answer to that. Can a plant be unhappy? There are people who tell you that plants can feel pain. No, plants aren't made of flesh,' Somberman mumbles. 'Come on! Let's get going. Stand up, let's see some action! Getting a grip on the world, that's what it's all about!

Slowly he becomes vertical. It feels like he is pushing up a leaden weight with his torso. Since he's lost his job, he gets easily tired. This is a stage I just have to go through; I'll

have to be brave, he tells himself, like a traveller lost in the desert. Think of the hungry Viennese children, as his granddad used to say when he was still a little child and went to stay with his grandparents and dawdled over his buttermilk porridge. The time had only just ended when those Viennese children had turned into sturdy grown-up Teutons, making up for their former emaciation by strutting around Holland in their uniforms, but his granddad's Viennese children were quite a different lot from these. Even after the Second World War, 'think of the hungry Viennese children' remained a much-repeated expression in the Somberman family.

Think of the Viennese children! He was too little then to say that that was just what he was doing, and that that was why he didn't eat his porridge. Why do you only realize some things later on? And later is always too late. This hundred and fifty-sixth day is starting off on the right foot. It augurs well for the rest of the day. Will his fortunes take a decisive turn today? He'll have to deprogramme himself. Is there such a thing as a programme in him anyway?

Somberman is standing beside the bed now and he pulls the curtains open. It's raining, thank God. Good weather has a paralysing effect on anyone who wants to launch an action. To think that in this grey and windy country they build flats with open galleries, and houses with roof gardens and through-lounge flats, whatever those might be. It is high time someone wrote a stiff letter to the bodies responsible. But they would just disappear for a moment and take a leak and leave things as they are.

Somberman also goes and takes a leak. The body, that fine, beautiful machine, just keeps on working. Apparently the mind can be totally mixed up without that doing the body any harm. The pointless hissing of this mighty jet. The body loves me, Somberman thinks, and I don't reciprocate in any way. I take all this love for granted. I'll pay a price for that some day. If ever a moment comes that I start paying heed to my body, just because there simply isn't anything else left, it'll be too late. Then my body will say, you should have done so sooner, when I was young and good-looking and loved you; that's not needed any more. Somberman looks down past his body. I'm already a little bit pregnant, but my feet are still firmly planted on the cold bathroom floor. Isn't that right, feet? Yes, sir. Polite feet. But yes, but what do I do with them? They don't get much excitement. I think I'll take them outside today.

It's already four days since Somberman left the house. After he had walked a few hundred yards, it started pelting down. He dived into a café, one he'd not been in before, which was full of burly men with massive moustaches drinking beer. They displayed a great

deal of lust for life, thumping each other hard on the back and exploding in noisy, hollow laughs. They were larking around, as it's called. Their jokes often alluded to the girl behind the bar, who kept her end up, laughing bravely. It was round three in the afternoon. Were they also unemployed? As far as one could see they had no problem with that.

'Hey, you old sod, stop looking so miserable; have a beer on me,' one portly gent with sideburns down to his chin invited Somberman. The latter put on a jovial expression, deciding it was safer to accept the beer. 'Did you just catch your wife with your best friend?' the belly fellow joked. 'For god's sake, you look like you've caught the plague. Drink up, maybe you'll love your life again. It wasn't long before Somberman was drunk and back on the street. The rain was still falling in buckets. The girl behind the bar had given the fatty a good slap after he'd laid his coarse mitt once too boldly on her bosom. It took six blokes to stop him dragging her over the beer taps. Somberman took advantage of the kerfuffle to leave the café. You did better to stay at home.

Somberman stares fearlessly at his face in the mirror over the washbasin. This morning too he's no oil painting. His thin blond hair hangs in wisps down the side of his oval face. He'll soon have to go to the barber. Busy – that's his wife's name – has for a long while now refused to serve as his hairdresser. Perhaps he'll go today, or else tomorrow. The longer your hair grows the more difficult it is to visit a barber's salon. They have their pride.

Faded blue eyes return his gaze with disdain. The night has given birth to a fiery pimple on one of his nostrils. His narrow bloodless lips seem stuck together. He pushes a toothbrush between them. Bags under his eyes as though he's been boozing for years, while in fact he is a modest drinker, even if that's begun to change recently. 'Is there no justice anywhere?' Somberman asks. 'You know better,' his face answers, 'take a proper look at me.' Unexpectedly his face winks at him. It must be a nervous twitch, Somberman decides, because there's no reason for a deliberate wink. Or was fate sending him a sign via the muscles in his face?

He doesn't stay long under the shower, because the notion of 'action' could well abandon him if he stays under the hot water too long. It is still not clear what this action should be about; let it be an action without a specific aim then. His brain is telling him that some kind of movement has to start up in him. The sulky child in his grownup shell has to be set free. He dries himself with a gust of energy, not neglecting to rub between his toes.

‘You’ll get your ears boxed, young man, if you stand the whole blessed day looking at yourself in the mirror instead of doing your homework,’ Somberman senior says. It’s just before supper and Somberman’s mother has sneaked on him for his own good. Half a day later Senior is dead – rode too hard in the mist on the Schiphol highway. From then on Somberman can look in the mirror with impunity. But death is always there, looking over his shoulder.

The tea in the thermos flask is still warm, if a little bitter. Busy has already left for her work, before nine. Still standing, Somberman peruses the morning paper. He doesn’t sit down, because he knows from experience that it costs him the greatest effort to get up again. In a glance he sees that everything is as it was: here is the Netherlands, there’s the rest of the world. Once again, a number of firms have bit the dust and thousands of people are put out on the street; he doesn’t need to read any more.

Since the day when he and five hundred others were suddenly informed that there was no work for them any longer, he has avoided reading this sort of news. The wound is still open and maybe it will never close for any of them – warehousemen, saleswomen, heads of department, buyers or office staff, one of whom was Somberman. The display windows of the department store, suddenly turned worthless, were all boarded up, while they just stood there speechless after the short but conclusive statement by the managers. People wept with rage and despair.

The works council that had been powerless to prevent anything and which, it was suspected, had let itself be led up the garden path in a truly professional manner, had beaten a hasty retreat. One director had had to carry the can, another was in hospital with a serious heart attack and a third had vanished without trace. After two weeks it turned out that he had committed suicide. A genuine scapegoat was nowhere to be found – this was what was most frustrating.

It was not long before the inevitable truth emerged that nobody had ever been trained for unemployment. Somberman feels like an exile, banished from his familiar world and dumped in a new one that he doesn’t know either the language or the customs of. And in fact, he has no wish to learn them either, because he supposes that it would mean abandoning the old world. Exiles seek their own kind to preserve the illusion that their old world hasn’t disappeared. We will go on seeing each other, that was the slogan. It was a matter of solidarity, particularly right now. They couldn’t get rid of him, not yet. And indeed, in the first months after the collapse of the Department Store, Somberman and his former

colleagues frequently held meetings in little rooms where the fire of their outrage initially forged links. Reckless plans were hatched, trips to parliament were plotted, indignant protest letters signed. The press showed interest. But it wasn't long before attendance at these meetings declined and less of them took place. Some people had found new jobs, but the majority didn't. They fell prey to despondency and chose to lick their wounds in solitude – like wounded beasts.

Very occasionally Somberman runs into an old acquaintance from the firm. They have a drink and share memories. It soon dawns on them they never knew each other all that well and conversation quickly dries up. Somberman hasn't retained any good friends from the Department Store. You saw each other at work, but outside working hours they all had their own concerns or acted as if they did.

Only Blockhead, from the books department, looks him up regularly. On those evenings, Busy soon retires to their bedroom with a sigh. 'The man drives me bonkers,' she says. 'I get itchy skin when I see him. To think he's the only person you've stayed in contact with from your work, the most boring person in the world. He's like a cardboard box full of sand.'

'He's not that bad, you know,' Somberman says, putting a good gloss on his friend, as if she's attacking him too, because he's not been so scintillating himself recently. 'Maybe Blockhead is not such brilliant company, but at least he never does anyone any harm.'

'He doesn't have enough imagination for that,' Busy says.

'You shouldn't rush to judgement,' says Somberman.

'I hate it when you're being so mild,' Busy says. 'Admit it; he's the biggest bore that roams the earth.'

But Somberman refuses to admit this.

Busy works as a receptionist in the Greenback Hotel. It's a hotel that is popular with the tourists and those who want to point the tourists in the right direction. There's an atmosphere of informal cheer there and an attitude that nothing is too good for our guests. When Busy returns home it always takes her a while before she can cast off her professional smile and resume her normal expression. The hotel is a favourite especially with Americans. 'Friendly people,' Busy says. 'Except they do make a fuss about money sometimes. They're always afraid they're being diddled. They think everyone in Europe is after their dollars.'

'And they're right,' Somberman says.

'Not with us,' Busy says indignantly.

Nobody is allowed to say anything bad about the Greenback Hotel, although she does do so herself sometimes.

‘If they’re changing money, we don’t charge them a higher exchange rate, like most hotels do.’

‘Change the subject, please,’ Somberman says. It annoys him when Busy talks too long about her work and he can hardly stop feeling jealous. Sometimes he catches himself hoping that she will be fired too, that’s how far gone he is. Why should one of them have work and the other not? Why should hotels survive when department stores don’t? Wouldn’t it be more fairly shared if nobody had any work?

For a moment he takes pleasure in this notion. He sees a sunny picture before him of happy families strolling in a park. Celestial music is playing and Somberman and Busy are there too, strolling hand in hand; they seem to be floating on air.

I must be dead, Somberman thinks. Shuddering, he switches the image off.

Blockhead doesn’t think of the Department Store any longer and if he does look back on his time there, unlike Somberman, it is without bitterness. A month before the firm was placed in wraps, he took early retirement. There was nothing to indicate then that the firm was about to crumble. His departure was celebrated with a handsome reception. The director – the one who later committed suicide – made a speech. Blockhead was presented with flowers, bottles of wine, cigars and a short-wave radio. The gesture was a generous one, even though he knew that the radio had been on special offer that very week in the radio and TV department.

Deep down, Blockhead is happy that the Department Store has ceased to exist. It means he no longer suffers from the thought that the firm is doing quite well without him. He hasn’t saved up a lot of money, but that’s not an issue for him. He hasn’t got great expectations of life. Like a hen, he passes his days grubbing around from grain to grain. His pension is enough for him to get by on and he’s built up some savings over the years which he draws on carefully. Sometimes he goes to the theatre and now and then he buys an LP. The shortwave radio is usually tuned into the French classical music channel. Sometimes in the afternoon, before he does the shopping for dinner, he goes to the cinema. Very occasionally, in the evening, he pays the Sombermans a visit. At a quarter past five every afternoon, he drinks a beer at home and listens to LPs of Charles Trenet, Mouloudji and Wim Sonneveld.

He never goes abroad, except for the odd weekend to Paris, just to get away from everything. When he's there he goes to a play, visits a couple of museums and buys a new tie or a smart jersey. But he doesn't go there any longer; all he does now is make plans.

Sometimes, before he falls asleep, he dreams that he has a cottage on the beach of a distant island. He is much loved by the indigenous population; they bring him fruit and he gives their children lessons. He'd been told by Somberman that the initial idea in the office was to offer him a holiday for two on the Canary Islands, but this idea was rejected because nobody could picture Blockhead having a second person to share it with and it felt a bit sad to send him such a long way all on his own. So they ended up giving him that shortwave radio.

One Autumn afternoon, the rain is lashing against the windows. I ought to switch the light on, Blockhead thinks. He puts down the book of poetry he's reading, goes to the kitchen and stares mindlessly at the unvarnished balconies opposite. Then he picks up his shopping bag and soon he is walking on the street towards the grocer and the butcher's. Maybe he'll buy a bottle of wine, to make up for the dreariness of the day, which still affects him a little, even though that's not in his nature.

At the corner of the narrow canal where he lives there's a snack bar. There used to be a dairy here too. Blockhead still recalls the clatter and jingling when the milk van drove by early in the morning and the deliveryman deposited the iron bottle racks in front of the shop window. The noise was a signal that the day had begun and if you didn't hear it you knew it was Sunday. It was impossible to sleep properly after that and the few times he did succeed, he slept right on.

There are always a few lanky teenagers hanging around the snack bar with bottles of beer. In the summer they sit on the pavement, their long legs splayed, surveying the passers-by. Only with weather like this, they are inside, operating the fruit machine or playing cards. They don't give the impression of having much going for them. But then who does nowadays?

When Blockhead goes past with his shopping bag, the largest of the young men is standing in front of the window. He stares at Blockhead, looking rather ferocious with his black leather wristband covered with studs and crude gleaming rings on his fingers. He's quite handsome with his mass of blond curls. Blockhead registers his stare for a moment and then looks straight ahead and turns the corner.

Unless I'm very mistaken that must be the milkman's son, he thinks. It makes sense that he feels a tie with the neighbourhood he grew up in. If that's him, I knew him when he was just a little lad and I stroked his curls, as you do with children. I still remember how he

once proudly showed me a drawing he'd done – a sun with a smiling face and a cottage bursting at the seams, with two chimneys and spirals of smoke and some animal that looked mainly like a cockroach on four long stiff legs, but which must of course have been a cow.

When Blockhead returns with his shopping, the lad is standing with his back to the window talking to his mate. He notices Blockhead and says something to his friend who shrugs his shoulders. Blockhead walks on timidly. When the opportunity arises, he will ask him if he is the milkman's son.