

Serge Lamothe

Mocha Dick Baldwin

(Excerpt from *Les enfants lumière*)

Translated from French by Paloma Vita

All rights reserved

© Serge Lamothe, 2012

It might have been a true story – a ghost story which, for once, turned out to be true. The story of a conspiracy no one could have seen coming. Not an end-of-the-world story and not a never-ending story either: just a true story with a beginning, a middle, and a more or less predictable end.

Even dead, even buried alive, it wouldn't mean a thing and it would mean it still. It would ring out loud in spite of our denials. It would speak of our taboos, our fears, and the convulsions of our hearts. It would scream so loudly our eardrums would split. We wouldn't be working anymore; it would be working us. It would make us lose our lust for life; we would be living it, breathing it, eating it. It wouldn't necessarily start at the beginning and it would certainly not end at the end – it would have the last word anyway. It would make us think a little before lulling us to sleep. And it wouldn't cost a thing.

It would be that... and we'd never speak of it again.

On the day after the last day – the day the last government was elected –, Tacha Baldwin clung onto the story she had been told about her ninth birthday. And even if the Chroniclers’ did not seem to take her moods into account in their narration of the event, several of them still wished they could go into more details on some the loose ends or other aspects of this family drama with worldwide impact which remained untold.

You see, Tacha Baldwin’s biological parents’ last act of bravado had consisted of getting themselves blown to kingdom come by a homemade bomb along with the President-for-Life, a dozen crime barons and almost as many of their democratically-elected cronies.

This assassination, perpetrated in the name of public good, had – as we all remember – terminated the reigning turbo-liberal regime and, in one fell swoop, also wiped out cyber-capitalism.

As any self-respecting terrorists, Tacha’s parents had broken every rule of political correctness by entrusting the bomb trigger to their daughter on the very day of her ninth birthday. The explosives had been supplied by the Permanent Bureau (this was not usual protocol but there had been precedents; this information was verified fifty years later when access to the files was finally granted). And as homemade as the bomb had been, it had still managed to propel

megatons of unrecyclable materials for yards around. Everyone agreed on one point: this was the work of professionals.

At first, the Universal House, reluctant to announce its position, had shown signs it was irked but the many demonstrations in support of the kamikazes showed where popular support lay and it decided not to intervene. And yet, mere minutes after the attack, the Universal House had issued a press release proclaiming that turbo-liberalism had only been a way of impoverishing people while continually promising them more and more wealth, and that it was good riddance.

A stubborn hum buzzed in Tacha's ears. Her father had promised her ginormous fireworks, but she had never expected the explosion to be this powerful. Even though her cognitive faculties might have been affected by the blast, she was still able to clearly perceive the motions of the crowd. All around her, people were jostling for position at the edge of the gaping crater, trying to get a better look into its depth. Fine grey ashes silently rained down on them, dusting their heads and shoulders. All kinds of debris, pulverized by the bomb, littered the ground and slowed Tacha's progress. She wove in and out of the crowd who had started to gather on the spot where moments before, the President-for-Life's limo, along with his cronies' and their well-bred gorillas', had

paraded. She snuck through the legs of the onlookers and listened attentively.

Tacha stared into the crater as if something or someone might emerge from the huge cloud of dust. She wasn't thinking her parents specifically – looking at the expression on her face, you would have thought she was happy for them. They had always dreamed of giving this crap turbo-liberalism a good thrashing! Well... mission accomplished! And it would never recover either. Tacha felt proud that her parents had been as determined as efficient, and, even if she was most likely too young to understand their deepest motivations, she sensed that the two of them had just accomplished something important and memorable.

Her parents had made it very clear when they'd left her in the middle of the park with the trigger on her lap. Her dad had promised, "You'll see pumpkin, for your ninth birthday, I made you fireworks that will be remembered for a thousand years to come!" As she observed the layer of dust slowly thickening over the crowd, Tacha understood what he had meant and that a thousand years might go by really quickly.

A rumour started to circulate: Apparently, the previous government's election had been rigged; but by whom? Mind you, all recent elections had been rigged and it was impossible to deny that

there had been way less elections since Lee Baldwin, the recently departed President-for-Life, had come into power. To be honest, there had not been any at all. Oh sure, people voted on a variety of topics at the drop of a hat and referendums followed one another at dizzying speed as automated terminals spat out surveys and polls on a daily basis. Survey forms were free and, with a simple click, you could receive them in triplicates. People voted on such issues as the trending colour of lawns in public parks, bylaws forbidding dogs to sniff each other's butts, which time to set a curfew, or the amount of slop to dish out to families in need. People voted for even stupider stuff, like how often the sun should set or the preferred scope of nuclear warheads. People voted as if it made a difference; as if it could ever change anything... But in all this, the Baldwins had never once been pressured to offer an opportunity for anyone new to present themselves to the presidency.

Democrastination was in full swing and the Permanent Bureau scrutinized everything and everyone.

But no matter, the President-for-Life was dead. Well, he might be dead but the moneyed class on the other hand was still very much alive; the rich stirred and whirred with anticipatory glee at the new opportunities for corruption. It took less than a minute for news of the attack to spread beyond the borders. The crater left by the explosion could be seen on every TV channel and everywhere, the

same image of quiet desolation with some news anchor in front of the gaping hole repeating the same message: "It is now official; the President-for-Life is dead! Long live the President-for-Life."

Early estimates assessed the crater left by the explosion to measure roughly one hundred meters in diameter and over forty meters at its deepest point. Several tons of soil, concrete, and metal had been blown by the blast and spread to a radius of several hundred meters.

At the time, no one thought such a thing possible but it was later reported that a certain Sheida Baldwin, a prostitute who lived a few kilometres away in the abandoned D27 warehouse district had found a bloodied eye on her doorstep, which she then preserved in a jar of vinegar. When the investigative committee entrusted by the Permanent Bureau with the job of identifying the President-for-life's DNA would finally decide to conduct an in-depth analysis of these human remains, the results, like all previous leads, would prove negative.

In any case, the rumour continued to spread venom in its wake and kept sticking its nose where it didn't belong. "What had been Tacha's role in the deadly attack?" Inquiring Baldwin minds wanted to know. Everyone agreed of course that a nine-year-old child could not have acted alone, but doubts lingered. And that was only one of the many questions which remained unanswered. There

were plenty of others but not one of them made their way onto the surveys and polls so generously distributed by the automated terminals. Those questions were whispered in private under the constant fear of drawing the unwanted attention of the Permanent Bureau and suffering the consequences. These concerns weighted heavily in the balance.

The on-lookers were now clustered at the edge of the crater. The ginormous dust cloud was slowly dissipating and continued to silently cover people with an ever-thickening layer of ashes which lent them a ghostly appearance.

Tacha, like many others, sat down by the edge of the hole. Once the dust cleared, everyone noticed a dark mass moving at the bottom of the crater.

Indeed, a blobby mass was definitely stirring. Quite unexpectedly a whale had managed to land at the bottom of the massive pit, most likely in the minutes directly after the explosion. It was too great to be true. No one could have seen this one coming, but the whale was really there, serene in her death throes. Tilted over on her side, she contemplated the crowd with a dull and resigned stare¹.

¹ The whale, a marine mammal who can weigh up to one hundred and fifty pounds, is one of the most imposing animal species to have existed on this planet over the last forty-five million years. The oldest known ancestor of the whale is the *Indohyus* –

Tacha was the only one with enough courage to go near the whale; she started to make her way to the bottom of the crater. Her tiny yellow rubber boots sank ankle-deep in the still smouldering ashes with each step. Her progress was slow and she moved gingerly under the stunned gaze of the Baldwins gathered around the crater. Without the slightest twinge of fear she inched her way to the spot where she guessed the whale's ear might be located².

this important link in the evolutionary chain which was the size of a domestic cat, had the appearance of a large sewer rat and roamed the earth forty-eight million years ago. As the story goes, a certain Ranga Rao Baldwin once unearthed remarkably well-preserved *Indohyus* fossils in the Kashmir region of India; but it is thanks to a New Hampshire lab technician who accidentally broke a small bone from its jaw while examining it that we owe the discovery of an unusual bone structure around its ear: *"When I saw it, I said: 'Oh my God!' For most mammals, the bone is a little bowl-shaped structure, but for whales, the bone that makes up the ear has a unique shape, just like for Indohyus. The inside of that bone is very thick, but the outside is very thin, the difference is huge. No other mammal has that!"*

² "Whale ears are located toward the front of the head. Which means it does not hear when it ejects its water spray and this presents the best moment to harpoon it. On top of the whale's head, in front of its eyes and fins, juts a kind of lens sporting two s-shaped holes – one on each side and evenly spaced. It is through these apertures that the whale sprays its water jet, and it does so with great force. The sound of this motion, which can be heard from over five kilometres, resembles the whistle of a wind-blown cave. It is when a whale is wounded that its spray is at its most forceful; it then sounds like rough seas or stormy winds. Right behind the lens, or *lump*, the whale's body curves

— What the hell are you doing here? Was the first thing she said. To which the whale most likely answered in a marine mammal kind of way but neither Tacha, nor anyone else, ever positively confirmed or corroborated the validity of that answer. Tacha nevertheless decided to remain by the whale's side. She could too easily empathize with the kind of distress the whale must be feeling at being stuck at the bottom of such a huge bomb crater, and Tacha had the firm intention of showing the poor creature every sign of compassion this unfortunate situation inspired. She thus set up a makeshift camp on the edge of the crater and asked for people's help. A few Baldwins started a Save the Whale initiative. The more fervent among them took on the project of filling the crater with sea water. They requisitioned sixty thousand buckets and formed a human chain spanning over forty kilometres. The rescue operation lasted several weeks and made the headlines for days. People came from all over the world to watch the miracle and bear witness. A few people

into an arc. The head is not rounded on top but presents a certain flatness, and a narrow slit stretches to its lower jaw, a bit like the roof of a house. This jaw is the widest part of the body, especially at its middle, since both the front and back ends are a bit tapered, following the shape of the head. The eyes are located between the lump and the fins, and are no bigger than a cow's. They are fringed by hairs that serve as eyebrows of sorts; the pupil is hardly bigger than a pea and the lens is as white, transparent and clear as crystal." According to Anne-Gabriel Meusnier of Querlon-Baldwin in *General Travel History, Natural History of Northern America*, 1759.

making the pilgrimage petitioned for the abolition of all borders and the signing of a peace treaty with all extinct and endangered marine mammals. A few of them even started to speak of the whale's apparition as an invitation to party. They claimed that any true demonstration in support of the whale could only unfold in a bacchanalian atmosphere. They wanted orgies. They wanted revelry. And more orgies and more revelry. The monumental size of a whale's sexual organs³ – male or female – had made the rounds of the rumour mill and that was reason enough for a number of Baldwins to swoon to the point of making a habit of masturbating by the crater's edge.

The whale, they posited, was a symbol of the last frontier; once it was reached, one could die in peace. But did not die whoever wished to.

³ "The genital organ of whales is a nerve whose power and size are proportional to the size of the animal. It measures seven to nine feet in length and is covered by a double skin that makes it look like a knife in its sheath with only part of the handle jutting out. The genitalia of the female are no different than what can be found in four-legged terrestrial mammals. Udders and teats similar to a cow's can be found on each side. Some whale udders are entirely white, while others sport blue and black spots. It has been ascertained that during mating, whales hold themselves erect with their heads above water and that the mating act – which is often very animated – attracts many whales at a time." According to Anne-Gabriel Meusnier de Querlon-Baldwin in *General Travel History, Natural History of Northern America*, 1759.

It was now the nineteenth day of the crisis and many of the Baldwins, grown bored with the fate of the whale, had moved on.

Work continued to progress however and the crater was slowly being filled with sea water. On the thirty-ninth day, the whale had a small pond in which she could move about a little and even if it didn't allow her enough room to turn around – and even less to swim in – it did ensure her survival for the time being. The whale remained silent but seemed to listen very attentively to the tales Tacha whispered in her ear.

Tacha chose to stay in the crater and rarely left the whale's side. In her lilting nine-year-old voice, she told her all the exciting adventures she had experienced with her globetrotting parents. She spared her no details; not the grim battles for the Free the Genome campaign, nor her nymphomaniac mother's indiscretions, and nor the reasons why turbo-liberalism was so harmful and needed to be eradicated.

As time went on, the crowd of onlookers had drastically thinned out, but a few determined souls were dead set on sticking around long enough to see how the whole story would turn out. Several of the families who had been particularly affected by recent events had set up camp at the edge of the crater and never strayed

very far. At first, it was just a few haphazardly set up tents but it soon bloomed into a small village of tin-roofed huts built from the debris of the Presidential Palace.

The number of whale supporters was steadily growing all across the new territories. Some of the more remote Baldwin clans who roamed deep in the Ziph Desert even sent envoys – travelling on foot or by yak – to celebrate the appearance of the marine mammal. And these Baldwins definitely knew how to party! Their idea of a proper celebration was to dance on the still-smouldering ruins of the last government and revel in the spontaneous demise of turbo-liberalism. The boldest among them looked you straight in the eye, just to make sure you were well and truly real and not merely an ersatz version of yourself or of the person whose mask you might be wearing.

And slowly but surely, as if every good and wholesome thing must de facto carry the seed of its evil counterpart, an anti-whale group began to mobilize. Some of the detractors felt no qualms about pointing out the enormity of the situation. Others, more conciliatory, reasoned that this whale – or any other for that matter – definitely had the right to reside in that crater – or anywhere else for that matter. But gradually, a distinct edge of discontent began to

spread through all those who refused to view the apparition of the whale as a messianic event but rather as a public nuisance.

Some of the nomadic people from on the outer fringes, renowned as much for their ferocity as for the staunchness of their views, even offered to dynamite the whale and case closed⁴!

But with the disappearance of the last President-for-Life, people had other fish to fry and the dynamite proponents were soon dismissed by the Universal House of Love, Justice, Prosperity and Peace. “That’s enough. Think about it, you morons,” read the memo from the Universal House, “an explosion made the whale appear in the first place! Who knows what might show up instead if we blow her up!?”

⁴ There exist only two documented cases of exploding whales. The first case involves a beached grey whale in Florence, Oregon. The Baldwins from the Highway Department who had been charged with the task of disposing of the carcass – weighing in at eight tons and measuring fourteen metres in length – called on the resources of the Permanent Bureau for help. The 100 kilos of dynamite meant to pulverize the behemoth had for only result to eviscerate it along its full length, which considerably amplified the messiness of the situation for the administrators. The second case involves a fifty-ton toothed whale found dead on a beach in Taiwan. It took fifty municipal employees over ten hours of hard labour to load it onto a truck and remove it from the scene; as bad luck would have it, a sizeable amount of gas accumulated in its viscera and the sweltering heat suddenly ignited into a massive explosion in the middle of downtown Tainan, during rush hour, causing the death of a taxi driver and the traffic jam of the century.

On the eighty-first day of the crisis, it seemed the whale finally had something to say and she started to sing a lament of infinite sadness. It might have been a call, but if so, it was filled with despair. One of these pleas from the heart which we know will never be heard by the object of the love that inspired them, but by others perhaps, spectral bystanders casting shadow-plays on the screen of forgotten lives, memories of a long-dead past. Several Baldwins fell to their knees and didn't get up again. Others later described the experience in mystical terms so archaic as to have lost all meaning. They spoke of illuminations, of prophetic visions – several of which evoked the predictable end of all that had been sacred to turbo-liberalism: technological and cybernetic wonders, geolocalisation, traceability, all forms of collective hypnosis. Now that humanity had decoded the human genome, manipulated life, destroyed biodiversity, eradicated all life on the quasi totality of the planet, everyone could call it a day.

It was the beginning of a new age.

Meanwhile, the song of the whale was growing in both power and volume and could soon be heard from hundreds of kilometres away⁵.

⁵ Like its cousin the dolphin, the chant of the whale might well be produced by an anatomical structure in its head. Called "phonic lips" this cavity resembles nasal

The Baldwins witnessing the event speculated endlessly as to the possible meaning of the whale's keening. Was she perhaps singing the eulogy of the turbo-liberal regime as a sign that – as some malicious wags would contend – it regretted its demise? Her overt opponents even went as far as dropping hints that the whale herself had milked the system, but their arguments didn't hold water. Her song got you right in the heart and if you spent even one second listening to it, you would instantly be convinced of her innocence.

But nothing is ever that simple. The legitimacy of the whale was continually being questioned. Wasn't her chant extolling a return to the corrupted feudal system in all its grim failings: the venality of its bureaucrats, the bribes, the backroom deals, the blackmail and the shady contracts? According to many, it inspired a rather unhealthy kind of neo-romanticism.

Was the whale singing in support or against the attack perpetrated by Tacha's biological parents? Did she glorify its consequences? No one, besides maybe Tacha, could voice an answer.

passages. As air travels through this narrow conduit, it causes suction and adhesion of the phonic lips and a vibration of the tissues, hence the production of sound. Isolated clicks are generally used for echolocation while a series of clicks and whistles are most likely used for communication purposes. It should be noted that humpback whales have perfected their chant to become virtuosos and have earned their epithet of "divas of the seas".

Everything continued to unfold in relative calm until the day Victor Baldwin, the renowned engineer, suggested amplifying the whale's song so that it could be heard by everyone, everywhere. He even suggested turning it into an opera, an anthem to the Baldwins' victory over turbo-liberalism. Riots ensued; some people were bitten, some arms broken. A tempest in a teacup.

Tacha had attentively listened to the whale's song. She didn't buy Victor Baldwin's interpretation; she dismissed it as too pompous. She offered her own translation.

Her version was no less grandiose, but it more faithfully captured the saga of this giant of the sea. It recounted the whale's slow evolutionary journey, from its humble beginnings as a small terrestrial mammal, and waxed extensively on the subject of her continual migrations.

Her heart-wrenching lament spoke to the loneliness at the core of all beings. It bemoaned that the sea's immensity could never be vast enough, that the sky was always too blue and the beloved always too far away. But above all, the whale's song inspired a deep and dull foreboding, rooted in the solitude of roaming the seven seas: the layers of filth and the corpses of innumerable dead civilisations now blanketing the ocean floor.

The whale was not afraid of death, quite the opposite; she beckoned her own demise with a fervour that froze one's blood. She had spent her lifetime crisscrossing the world's oceans in search of a companion and all her searching and seeking had led her to the appalling realisation that she was the last of her kind – the very last humpback whale – and that when her love song eventually died off, the very idea of whales, of their mating rituals, their play, their profound dignity and sovereign elegance would disappear forever.

The report mentioned that the whale's name was Mocha Dick. It was maintained that she had revealed her name to Tacha at the very beginning of the crisis. Mocha had not only confided in Tacha, she had also formulated a few requests, some of which addressed measures to be taken after her passing and others which needed to remain secret.

According to trusted sources, Mocha died about a hundred days after her apparition. Right before her death, she let out a majestic plume out of her blowhole, sending a spray of gas and water droplets to an impressive height of 15 metres. This last exhalation was without a doubt the most spectacular she had ever produced since her apparition in the crater.

In accordance with Mocha's instructions, Tacha hired the services of the engineer Victor Baldwin and commissioned a diving suit in her size. In her gear, Tacha looked like a miniature toad

wearing yellow boots. The diving suit was slowly lowered into the belly of the whale; various measuring instruments, speleological tools and a survival kit soon followed through the blowhole.

In the first years, Tacha Baldwin's reports reached us with exemplary regularity. Most of them have been lost now, but a few were read in public at the time. Tacha expressed herself in a difficult language that was somehow still understood by the majority of the Baldwins who had heard Mocha's song and felt they had grasped its meaning.

Her early reports were pretty straightforward. They covered Mocha's earliest memories and reprised many of the familiar themes favoured by her fans. Over time however, her reports started to become more esoteric. They offered glimpses of mythical horizons, vanished civilisations, cathedrals of lush vegetation, ghostly ships of unfathomable proportions sailing the waves of time.

In her last message, Tacha mentioned the recent discovery of an energy vortex located near one of the whale's inner ears. She described it as a pastel-hued swirling tornado of liquid light – a portal of sorts that beckoned her to dive in.

It is true that the only known transcription of Tacha Baldwin's last report gave the Chroniclers much trouble in its decryption. The quasi inaudible message goes on for the better part

of a century. A few Chroniclers had the privilege of listening to it many times over; they all swore they could distinguish the sounds of laughter – children’s laughter, to be precise. The most widely accepted interpretation posits that Tacha, a few seconds before diving head first into the vortex, heard her parents call her name.