

# BIOGRAPHY



JACQUES BREL



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# THE WALTZ OF LIFE

**CHARACTER:** JACQUES BREL

**DATES:** Schaerbeek, 8 April, 1929, Bobigny, 9 October 1978

**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:** BELGIUM

**HISTORICAL PERIOD:** 20th century

**SUMMARY:** The opening of this story is inspired by a verse from the song “La ville s’endormait” while the ending is inspired by a verse from the song “The Marquises”.

Jacques was born in the capital city of Belgium.

After working in his father’s paper mill, he moved to Paris to follow his dream of becoming a singer, writing lyrics that have entered music history.

**KEY WORDS:** SINGER, MUSIC, POETRY, ADVENTURE

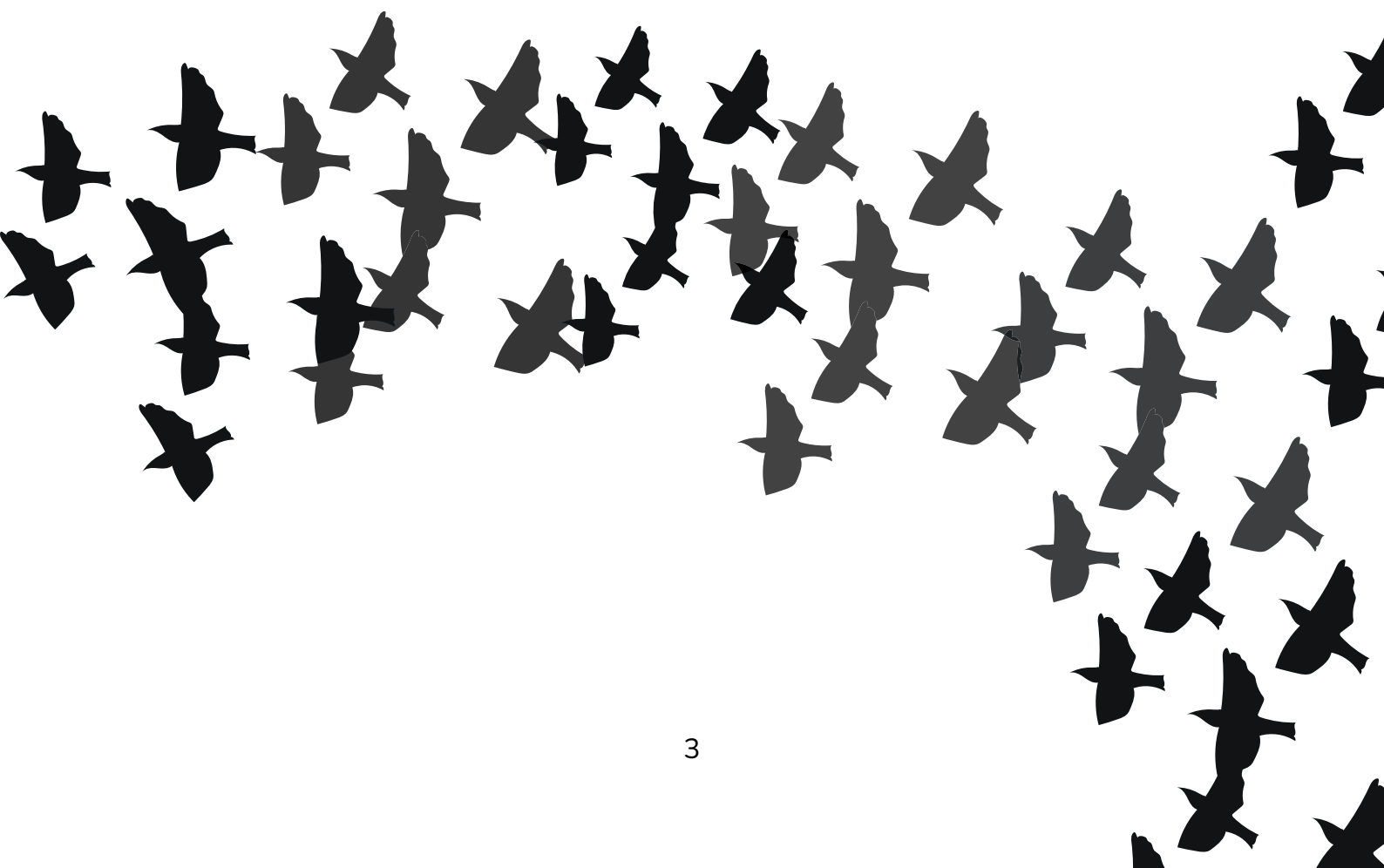
**GENRE:** BIOGRAPHY

**AGE:** 9 - 10 YEARS

**AUTHOR:** Barbara Lachi

# THE WALTZ OF LIFE

The sky had turned red, the sun was ready to leap across the world. The city would soon fall asleep. A flock of birds drew sinuous waves in the sky, and the waves drew flocks in the sea, Jacques imagined it all from his window. In a small part of Brussels called Schaerbeek, Jacky, who had just turned ten, felt that he wanted something different, and imagined riding that wave of birds and migrating far away, to another town or perhaps to an unknown island.





The big age difference with his parents, who did not always understand him, and the school that bored him, made him restless and sad, but in the end, that seemed to be the least of his problems on that spring day in 1940, when the German army invaded Belgium.

The sky darkened, it was no longer occupied by the elegant dance of birds but by large threatening planes: difficult and painful years began for everyone, including little Jacky.

Cities were destroyed, whole families wiped out, the world went mad and everything appeared unrecognisable.

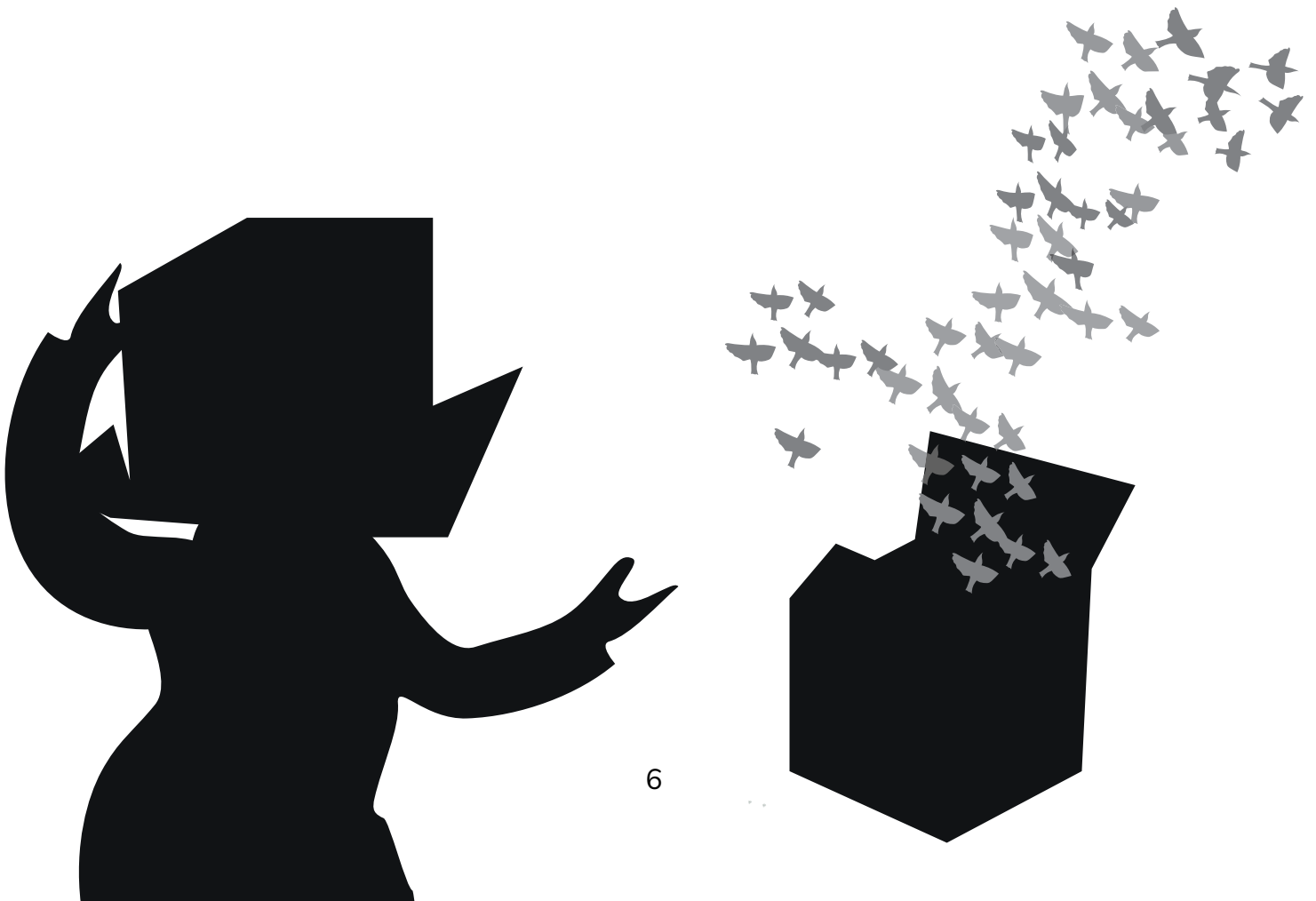
The days of war, one following after the other, were filled with fear and hope, a hope that sooner or later the horror would end.

And indeed, one summer morning in 1946, the bombing and shooting ceased and Belgium was finally free.



Jacky decided to take a bicycle trip to the forests of the Ardennes. The wide, soft hills covered with towering, ancient trees filled him with joy and excitement. He felt like a pioneer as if before him those lands were unknown. Everything enchanted him, the soft, luminous grass, the roar of the Meuse River, the rustling of the tree tops, the secret scent of moss, the calls that birds and animals of all kinds made from those green depths. Jacky was happy, he felt free and in tune with the world.

Returning home brought him back to reality: although his love of poetry and literature were important, they were not enough to save him from expulsion, as all other subjects did not exist for him. “You will come to work in the family paper mill”, said his father. Jacky could not refuse, but deep down he felt like nothing more than a cardboard box! “Just like a box, people decide my shape and what I should contain!”.



Jacky felt sad and joined the youth movement La Franche Cordée. There, urged on by people who believed in him, he began to write his first songs, pouring all his imagination, his feelings, his poetry into the lyrics. He began to live two parallel lives: there was a Jacky who filled out forms to describe cardboard sheets and Jacques who wrote about “the waves of the sea, which sang songs that even children’s books did not know about”.

The weekend was all about Jacques; the Jacques who sang his feelings, who used the words that came from his heart, and it was with those that he wanted to fill his days. Listening to him one day, a journalist named Angèle visited him.

“I have never heard such beautiful songs; you should go to France and record an album!”. She told him.

Jacques was no longer a boy, but a man with a family.

He had married and had two daughters, but he felt that life was too orderly, too boxed in, that he needed to go on an adventure like that day on his bicycle. His wife realised that she had to let him go, she loved him very much and wanted him to be happy.

Paris, however, was not immediately a welcoming city, Jacques performed in small, smoky cabarets for pennies. He could only afford to eat once a day and was often forced to sleep on benches.



Although he spoke and sang in French, he felt he was in a big city that did not understand him. He felt lonely. Yet his songs were beautiful, his voice had the power to enchant, to tell stories in words no one had ever used before, and there were many who believed in him, who urged him not to give up. One day in a cabaret he met a singer called Charles Aznavour. “I know you sometimes sleep on benches. I have a dance studio but the dancers only start rehearsing in the morning. You can go there to sleep and live, until things get better”. Jacques felt that his luck was finally changing: in the empty hall, he felt less lonely and continued to write and sing with confidence, until the audience finally noticed him.







That tall, thin young man, the hollow face and deep-set eyes, the long arms underlining the phrases, the words of his songs, everything about him was enchanting, but above all it was his voice so melodious and intense, sinuous and leaping at once. The words rolled and stretched at his will, rising and falling, sometimes soft, sometimes sharp.

Song after song he conquered the hearts of the public, travelling from city to city, from theatre to theatre, singing, singing. Without ever stopping, doing shows almost every night. Jacques wrote and sang, collaborating with famous singers and musicians. He invented music and words, anti-war songs, love songs, songs as whirling as a waltz! A timeless waltz that offered space and time to lovers. The words sounded like a tongue twister, swirling fast like a whirlwind, in a tumult of emotions.





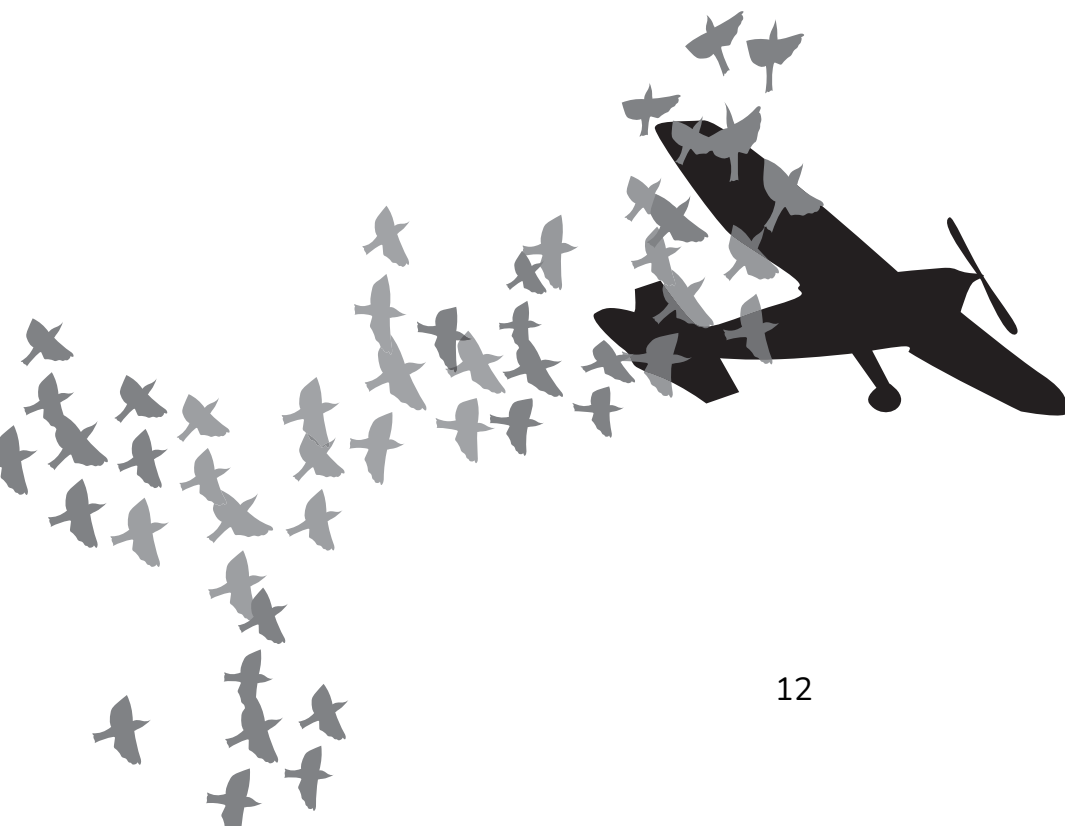
Jacques wrote songs, but also plays and screenplays for the cinema. These were years of great success but also of fierce criticism, Jacques wrote:

“Men sometimes look like laughter but laughter resembles sobs. In life, joy and sadness alternate”.

Tired of everything, he decided to leave it all behind.

He needed emptiness, silence, peace or perhaps just new adventures. When he was young, the author Antoine de Saint-Exupery had enchanted him, so he took to roaming the skies and the sea. After flying over the skies of Europe, he landed a sailing ship on the island of Hiva Oa in the Marquesas archipelago.

Jacques needed to be just Jacques, no longer the famous singer Brel.





Years went by, he had just turned 49, and was seriously ill, he knew he was going to die soon and decided to do it the way he had always lived his whole life, by singing... so he recorded one last album.

“The wind then stopped blowing and time stood still”.







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