



THE UNBEARABLE BURDEN OF THE OBVIOUS

I Laugh, Sing and Drink



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The Unbearable Burden of the Obvious

Part I

I sing, laugh and drink

Leo Feyaerts

Dedicated to my wife

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Good evening, Mum,

Are you sleeping? I'm not. I don't know what's going to happen to me. Or if I'll be able to stay away from you. Annie's coming over soon. I don't think it'll end well. I'm always lying to myself.

You did your best for us. I don't blame you for giving in to him. The situation was bad enough without you not giving in. But you could've gone into his study after he'd left. You could have taken the phone out of my hand and explained the situation to her. You could have told her to forget everything because you'd changed your mind. But nope. But you did eavesdrop on us, didn't you? From the living room while I was wrecking myself two doors down. I'm your son, goddammit! You don't have a clue what she meant to me. All you care about is doing your duty. What duty is there to perform while the head of the family is throwing you completely off balance? What use are Mr Kant's categorical imperatives in such circumstances? Because I'm a thinking person, I should just keep my cool and jump into the well?

This city, Mum, is a forge in which men forge glowing ambitions. Ambitions that are alien to me. For I know my own kind. Our eyes are begging for love, but when a woman stands still, we look away as the pain tears us apart and the shards clatter on the pavement.

No, being a dog is not a human job, and happiness cannot be measured by the frequency, volume and speed with which a man ejaculates. Can an eagle fly when it hates its wings? Can fish breathe when they don't dare to drink water? I chase shadows, repeating the mistakes of the previous days. Every morning I rise like hot steam, and every evening I fall like a cold raindrop.

Is it even possible to tame a lion by calling it a lion? And what's the point of calling the force that pushes me against the earth 'gravity'? Is that going to make me float?

If I put my mind to float, it will drown. But I can see the other side. Sometimes my thoughts are as clear as a cloudless freezing night.

The other day in that pub they asked me if I wanted some more peanuts. Their question sounded like dead leaves rustling on a frozen field. Where do the peanuts actually come from? Montevideo? I will not die in Montevideo. Montevideo is everywhere. Everywhere there are railway embankments.

Woman against man, man against woman. As Janus Bifrons consumes himself, the child cries, the boy dreams, the man wanders, on his way without a key, like a map full of dead ends. At every crossroads, the wrong choice. A journey from clarity to ice orchids.

And Melun?

Clovis¹ broke a vase in Soissons. Jean Racine was born in La Ferté-Milon. Funny, right? I tell sad stories nicely, and vice versa.

If only I were Don Quixote. No, that man is too noble. I'm always stuck in the dream of the old Karamazov, a lecherous drunk, a jester out of shame, a clown out of suspicion. Every time I walk with Emilia through the sun-drenched meadows of Brasschaat or the wooded paths at home, the world turns into a witches' Sabbath of frenzied whores.

The world's full of fools, right? But unlike mine, their cackling and whining isn't just about impressing others, especially their fathers. Mine is to cut Dad's throat with the guillotine of a success to which he didn't contribute anything at all. So no, I'm not a noble man. *Pari siamo*.² Rigoletto hires the assassin. What difference does it make if one has a hump on his back and the other on his soul?

This is how I torture myself. Every time I get out of bed, shave, have a shower and get all dressed up in front of the mirror, and every time I stumble drunkenly through the streets of Leuven, I'm always reminded of Canio's aria: "*Recitar mentre preso dal delirio*." Act, you dirty animal, while the pain makes you so mad that you no longer know what you're saying or doing. Forward! Into the scene! Are you a man? You're a clown! *Vesti la giubba*. Put on your costume and powder your face! The audience has paid to laugh. So smile and laugh! *Ridi Pagliaccio!*

I'm the devil, Mum. Hell is my drug's name. Or, to put it another way, 'despotic hubris'. For every rejection is an election.

No, I'm not just a mask hiding a head full of scorpions! I'm not looking to die as some horny cash-grabber, wallowing in self-pity and causing mayhem in his wake. If I give in to that, there'll be a raging train coming towards me!

¹ Clovis (c. 466 – 27 November 511) was the first king of the Franks to unite all of the Franks under one ruler.

² We are equals.

The Big Bad Wolf

Hi, all you animals! Can you see me sitting in this pigeon fancier's pub? Do you see me sitting here, half hidden under the leaves of an ornamental plant, with no tears left but too drunk to refuel? There's a guy in a blue jacket sitting at the bar in front of me, his back to me. Opposite him is the voluptuous landlady in a fire-red minidress, legs crossed.

Oh great, here we go again with him lamenting the catastrophic flight of his pigeons and the number of lost ones! "Two males, goddamn. A good race, my best. Two winners for breeding. Beautiful, strong and clever. They should never have released them in such a storm. Those French idiots. It's always the same with those idiots. Give me another one, and have another one on me."

All his stanzas end with this line.

She puts her hand on his wrist and squeezes it. "Yeah, Franske³, it's terrible, huh? Unbelievable. But cheer up, man. There are still others in your loft, also good ones and prize winners. You can still breed with them, right?"

Her husband sees that I get what's going on. He's nodding at her from behind a small table, his eyebrows raised. She shrugs, looks at me like 'is that piece of shit still sitting there' and pulls her hand back. Her fancier reaches out, grabbing one of her breasts! Shoot! Over the fabric! That's all we need! Yeah, right, fancying pigeons; fancying ostriches, it is!

Her husband empties his glass: three is a holy number, after all.

The front door swings open! Also a student, obviously! He's got a big smile, black hair and a black goatee. Look how he struggles with the swell of this dilapidated Noah's Ark!

"Greetings from the man in the moon."

"Another one of those failed idiots," growls the publican.

The pigeon fancier chuckles. Behind him, the fat cunt croaks, "We've stopped serving. We're closing." She gestures 'get lost', her breasts falling. The rude bitch! She's got a fresh port right in front of her! I call out from under the plant, "Get him a beer, dammit!"

"Hah, Johnny!"

"Hah, René!"

³ Flemish diminutive and hypocoristic form of *Frans* (Francis).

Compagnons des mauvais jours with a meager income.⁴ He treats the bitch to a wonderful compliment. Her mood instantly changes. It's just so pitiful!

"You coming with me?"

I pull myself up from behind the table. We stumble into the Mechelsestraat.

"Well, I don't mind taking you home because you're seeing pink elephants, but then I need to sleep over at your place."

He doesn't look dangerous.

"I'm hungry. I'm the Big Bad Wolf."

Is he joking? My fridge is empty. A few hours ago, Annie broke up with me in the St Maartensdal⁵ flat. I cried until I was dry-eyed, dragged my bedding back to my car and went back to ring my previous landlord's bell in the Bondgenotenlaan.

Luckily, my rooms hadn't been rented yet. Our farewell was not the friendliest. All landlords in Leuven love chickens like me because they pay their rent on time every month. His other tenants are much less scrupulous than me. They're always stomping up the stairs, pretty plastered. Just like me, but not half as sneaky. So he picked up the phone to ask if Dad was really okay with the rent being cancelled, but he got a yes answer because I'd passed my exams in July.

"Boy oh boy, I'm wasted!"

He's clearly a *Kempenaar*.⁶

"My second session has been a disaster. I've flunked and that's a disaster for Dad and Mom. He was scolding me so loudly into the phone that my ears were scorched by it. Starting next week, I'll only get half of my pocket money. It's a real shame that the student bars won't open until next week."

"Why?"

"Because they won't let me drink on credit. Come on, now tell me where to drag you."

"Just throw me in the canal."

⁴ The poem "*Compagnons des mauvais jours*" by Jacques Prévert begins with the lines "*Compagnons des mauvais jours/ Je vous souhaite une bonne nuit/ Et je m'en vais. La recette a été mauvaise* "

Companions of the bad days/ I wish you a good night/ And I'm leaving. The receipts have been bad.

⁵ The "St Martin's Valley" apartment complex is located centrally within the city of Leuven. The area derives its name from the priory that was situated there until the mid-20th century, and whose church was inaugurated on St Martin's Day.

⁶ Inhabitants of the Kempen. The Kempen (formerly known as *Kempenland* or Toxandria) is a diluvial sandy region in north-eastern Belgium and the Dutch province of North Brabant, south of the Eindhoven-Tilburg line.

The narrator makes reference to the geographical area known as the Antwerp Kempen, which constitutes the easternmost part of the province of Antwerp, extending from Geel to Mol. The dialects of the Limburg Kempen region are notable for their marked differences.

"Come on, man, you're just skin and bones. The rats are gonna have a good laugh."

"You aren't gay, are you?"

"What? Pardon!? No way, haha! The mere thought! Where on earth did you get that idea!?"

Later, he sings quietly. It helps me to get rid of some more tears on the cobblestones.

At the Vismarkt⁷ he refuses to take the shortest route through the Vaartstraat.⁸ I don't mind. It doesn't make much difference anyway. In the Lyrique the light is still on.

"Do you still have any money?"

I take two bills out of my jacket pocket, one of fifty and one of a hundred.

"That'll do."

He gives me the fifty back, rushes inside and comes back with six bottles of Apollinaris⁹, two open and four closed ones in his coat pockets. He hands me one without a crown cap. "Drink it up. It'll help with the hangover. Beer is a diuretic. You gotta be careful, otherwise you'll end up with dehydrated kidneys. And lie down in bed with your feet bare. That helps, too."

He empties his bottle of mineral water, gives me the change and two of the closed bottles. We make our way across the Grote Markt¹⁰ and past St Pieter's¹¹ and Place Foch¹² to the Bond¹³.

He refuses my offer to have him sleep in my bed. "Just give me the blanket. It's thick enough."

He throws it on my sofa. I stagger to my bedroom and put on my pyjamas. Later, when I wake up, I hear him stumbling through my living room! His hands are scratching at my door! "Hey, are you up? You're awake, right? I need to pee."

I push the button on the nightlight and sit up, feeling dizzy. "Just come in."

He's still got all his clothes on except his shoes. We look at each other with blinking eyes.

"My bladder's bursting."

"It's the door on the right there."

As he empties his bladder noisily, he starts singing, "*And in the city of Leuven,*

⁷ Fish Market

⁸ Canal Street.

⁹ A brand name for sparkling mineral water.

¹⁰ Grand Place.

¹¹ St. Peter's Church (1425–1500).

¹² Foch Square.

¹³ The vernacular abbreviation of Bondgenotenlaan (Avenue of the Allies).

there is a large urinal, so that the city of Leuven would be neat and clean. One guy pees here, another there. Your fly is barely open and the police are already there. It's a disaster, bloody hell." He repeats the last sentence three times, finishing with a thunderous bloody hell. He bursts out laughing, the devil, flushes the toilet and re-enters. "Where's the bottle opener?"

"Pardon?"

"The bottle opener, the cap opener, Dutchy!"

It's on standby next to his couch. I get up to go to the toilet too. When I get back, he's got two bottles ready, pops the caps and drinks one bottle half empty. He then gives me the other one. "Drink up."

When I've finished, he goes back to the sofa but forgets to close the door. We both burp with difficulty. A little later I doze off.

In the morning, I wake up feeling sick to my stomach. My bladder's full again! I can't just stay lying down: I'll end up puking all over the bed!

Coming back from the toilet, I feel totally racked. He's sitting up straight in the dim light. "Bloody hell," he says, looking around. "This isn't a *kot*¹⁴, man, this is a fucking palace!"

I get embarrassed; he bursts out laughing. "You're going to get a lot of visitors when they find out about this."

"Who?"

"The Geelse."

Never heard of them.

"Wow, you look terrible!"

He opens the last bottle of water. "Drink up, mate! If it stays in..."

We hiccup the burp away.

"Why don't you come and lie down on the bed? There's plenty of room."

I move to the side. Oh, my bowels, please finally rumble a bit! I nod off, feeling pretty miserable.

Two hours later, he wakes me up with his tossing and turning, even though I'm lying as far away from him as possible. The suffering is over! We take turns having a poo, showering and getting dressed. Then we sit opposite each other in my living room where he tries to break the ice with some dark humour. It doesn't work. Then he tries this: "You mustn't sit here staring into space all day. You'll dehydrate. There are plenty of people who have managed it. You won't last. You need to make friends."

¹⁴ Flemish student slang for student room.

"I'm in the faculty circle."

"And? Did you have fun?"

"Um..."

"So you didn't."

"No, not really... Last year at Christmas... We had a party, just the ones from my year. At the Lyrique. Most of them stood in a circle under the chandelier. The others hated it, and so did I. We were staring at it with long faces. Then this old guy turned up. I was sitting alone behind a small table by the door. The rest of the team were standing in the middle. He looked at my Spa¹⁵ and asked, 'Party?' 'Second year of pharmacy,' I said.

In the middle, our president shouted out, 'Raise the glass to the level of our girl-loving hearts!'

'They're *salamandering*¹⁶,' I told the man. Of course you know much better than I do what that is, *salamandering*."

"That goes without saying, but it doesn't matter, just go on."

"The *porren*¹⁷ raised their glasses in front of their boobs. Behind me I heard the fat Van Istendael say with a sneer, 'Well they've got a big heart.' And he was right! They proved so later.

'Raise your glass to our giant,' the President shouted.

Everyone raised their glasses in front of their harlequin; the girls did the same in front of their own device, no matter how meaningless that was.

'To our tramp!'¹⁸

Again, everyone raised their pint to their clown.

'To the nose! Sniff the delicious smells!'

Yeah, right, delicious smells.

'To the upper lip, the lower lip!'

'To the harelip,' someone said, holding his pint before the peach of the beauty next

¹⁵ The municipality of Spa in Belgium is renowned for its mineral-rich spring water, which is utilised in the production of medicinal baths. These baths employ a blend of spring water and, in certain instances, sea water, to offer therapeutic benefits to individuals. The term "spa" is employed as a generic designation for any establishment offering such baths, irrespective of its specific geographical location.

¹⁶ In the Flemish tradition, the salamander is a type of toast, and it is customary for the glass to be emptied to the bottom. This practice has given rise to the idiomatic expressions "make a salamander" and "drink a salamander".

¹⁷ The term "*porren*" is used in Flemish slang to refer to female students. The singular form of the noun is "*por*".

¹⁸ *Geus* (Dutch) is a corruption of the French term "*gueux*", which is defined as "beggar" or "tramp". This epithet was initially employed by the Spaniards to refer to the Dutch, and subsequently by Roman Catholics to the Reformed.

to him. She was, of course, outraged.

'To the middle lip,' our genius corrected, 'a goodbye kiss!' Luckily, no one made a mistake."

The Wolf bursts out laughing. "And after that?"

"You know that well enough."

"Tell me anyway."

"Then came the questions, the rhetorical ones, always the same. 'Where is the fire? Are the houses ready?' Unbelievable! 'Are the hoses ready?' he corrected, 'then hose down on command...'"

"Is that so bad?"

"No, just heartbreakingly boring."

"And so you just left?"

"No, I didn't. I told you I was in a company there. I told the old man at my table, 'Christmas party. It's a Christmas party. Herod should have had anti-aircraft guns to shoot the angel's shirt off when he came down from heaven to warn Saint Joseph.' Yeah, go on, laugh all you want. The beer was sloshing around so loudly in their mugs that I couldn't even hear what he said in return. The guy with the fastest drink in the middle tapped his glass on the floor, then the next guy and the next. The women were standing there, gagging with beer running down their necks. Then they also bent the knee. The prettiest of the bunch, the President's sweetheart, shot a glowing arrow through my guts with the bow of her butt."

"Hahahahahaha! That's a good one! I'll remember that one!"

"A Madonna on a manhunt with a bum on fire. She was wearing a bright red mini, which was the perfect expression of her mindset. All evening she and her friend had been plotting with Raf Detiège, the man who had lured me there. Meanwhile, her chosen one was clamouring behind his board table! Just before the *ad fundum*¹⁹, Detiège let her pour some of her beer into his glass because she'd giggled she was already quite tipsy. 'Actually, I'm two sheets to the wind, olala,' she said. She'd had herself a good fill by us with beer... Meanwhile, the carnival was in full swing over there. 'Omnes ad sedes,' shouted our Senior.²⁰ One of the waiters cleared away the glasses. Then Detiège came back with his Madonna and that's when the playacting really started. He hung around with us for a few more minutes, then suddenly said he was tired and would go to bed. He shook our hands

¹⁹ The term "drinking *ad fundum*" is employed to denote the act of rapidly draining an entire glass in a single, uninterrupted movement.

²⁰ Please be seated. The appellation "Senior" is bestowed upon the individual who occupies the position of chairperson within the student club.

and left. His pussycat stayed for a few more minutes, staring dreamily ahead, then went over to her darling, stroked his bovine head and went after Detiège, swaying her hips."

"Is that all? Is that all?"

"Actually, no. He scored one last direct hit, my friend, the next day before the first lesson. He thanked me for staying with him all night. He said that that's how he was able to make his move."

"So they had a mutual agreement?"

"Man, you won't believe it!" he said, "That chick was drunk! In the Lyrique, she'd held back a bit, but after that, she just went for it! It's a good thing it's so dark on the Lei²¹ and the Dyle²² can't complain to the police, because the way we were standing there, messing around with each other...!" Is that really so funny? Do you really find it that funny? I really didn't need that extra explanation."

"All in all," he laughs, "you were obviously not amused. That's the important thing. Carlo, my friend, we drink too. If you can't handle it, you'd better stay away from us. But you were really on a roll yesterday. You have heard about us, haven't you, about the clubs?"

Freeloaders, drunks, dullards, too lazy to hold a book and all of them sexually frustrated.

"I do know what they say about us. We're worth far more than the drivel of a bunch of bigots."

"I don't feel like failing again."

"We're all here for a parchment. More than half of us have to study on grants... What happens if the power goes out in a dance hall?"

"I guess they'll turn on a generator."

"We're not talking about a chocolate factory here."

Had I already mentioned that too?

"Then they go home."

"Exactly. They're just not able to entertain each other. When with them the music stops and the mirror ball on the ceiling stops spinning and the DJ stops blaring, the atmosphere just disappears. It's the same with the faculty circle. There, it's the president's job to keep everyone awake. I know some lifelong friendships are formed there, but for most it's a case of 'bomb your exams, you idiot, then I'll have a better chance'. And that attitude just gets stronger every year. We're not looking for that. We don't fight over women. If the electricity fuse blows during our get-

²¹ An avenue.

²² River in Central Belgium.

together, we just light candles and keep on singing."

"How many are you?"

"I'd say about twenty-five, including the presidium."

"I'm from Schilde. So I can't become a member, right?"

"No worries. Anyone who can laugh is welcome. If we turn away everyone who isn't from our region, we'll lose half our members."

"I don't know... I don't think I'm cut out for it... What about baptism?"

"There we go again. Those newspapers, always generalising incidents... The Dutch had someone on the last train to glory last year. It seems like they can't do without all that sensationalism... No, I don't have a problem with the Dutch. I'm sure there are lots of normal people there too. But I've seen their students in action. In Ghent. We were invited there by the Tax, the Taxandria, our sister club in the RUG, to attend a club²³ in *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*.²⁴ At first, everything went well. We were in a separate room, playfully disciplined as always, but then they suddenly stormed in with their entire *dispuut*. That's what they call it: a *dispuut*²⁵. Yeah, right. It was just a lot of noise and shouting stupid things with a big mouth! The landlady had passed them on to us because she couldn't handle them herself. What happened next was pretty incredible. The women were even worse than the men. They insisted they were guests. I've never seen such a bunch of louts insult their hosts with such arrogance. They wouldn't let anyone finish a sentence, not even the president of the club, whose beer they were draining by the barrel, all the while shouting and swearing. They were all pros at it, especially when they all did it together. That was their idea of fun and free speech. If only one of them had had a brainwave and come up with something witty! But no, nothing at all. All they came up with were stupidities, boorish and empty, but with an air of we-know-better. When they started ignoring us and making the laws themselves less than five minutes later, I asked the President of the *Tax* for the gavel and gave them such a piece of my mind that even their masterminds realised what we thought of them. My final comment really hit home. I said that if alligators were swimming around in their great rivers, they could still jump into the water with confidence

²³ Drinking party of the club members with speeches and singing.

²⁴ RUG: Ghent State University (Dutch: *Rijksuniversiteit Gent*, abbreviated as RUG); now: Ghent University (Dutch: *Universiteit Gent*, abbreviated as *UGent*).

The term "club" is used to denote a social gathering where members engage in the consumption of alcohol and the singing of songs in a private setting.

The *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* was a student pub that may have been named after the Flemish national anthem, *De Vlaamse Leeuw*, or after Count Robert III (1249 – 17 September 1322), also known as Robert of Béthune and nicknamed The Lion of Flanders (*De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*).

²⁵ Debate club.

because those beasts had a taste far too refined to eat them. You should have seen the reaction! They all got together and said how shocked they were. 'Outrageous! And in front of guests!' And then they all cleared the room, remembering their preferred expression: good riddance... Well, mate, that's not how it works with us. I'm not going to tell you what we do, because that would ruin the surprise. We'll have to talk about it in the presidium. But don't worry. We'll have a good laugh at you and make fun of you when you stand there trembling and performing tricks." "Not without clothes, surely?"

"Don't worry. We've all played for clowns and danced ballet. But we're not animals. It has to remain fun. We're already short-staffed as it is, we don't need any more excesses. And again, we don't need them at all."

"You're not Flemish nationalists, are you?"

"You mean fascists, right? We are nationalists, no doubt about it, but not some debating club, and definitely not the VMO... The VMO? My goodness me! The Flemish Militant Order, the hit squad of the *Volksunie*! You don't know them either? It's clear from your reactions that you're not a son of *Tineke from Heule*." He starts singing very light-heartedly: "*Tineke from Heule, our housemaid, can work like a horse, can milk, can muck, can scrub like the best.*"²⁶ Yes, and she can grind, but with what, hahaha!"

"It's all about comradeship," he solemnly continues. It's about being happy for every *commilito*²⁷ who makes it at the end of the year, feeling regret when someone fails, and feeling empty when he graduates and the whole club sits in the dark listening to him sing, '*The fearful night is over again, we ride silent, we ride mute, we ride to destruction.*'²⁸ OK, there is one walking among us, Fonz-the-Nazi. He collects souvenirs from under the war. But our communist, Vic, has already emptied a keg of punishment pints because at every command, he shouts 'I am opposed'... No, mate, the baptism makes everyone equal and at least we laugh."

"How does a club like yours work?"

"There are *Anciens* and Pledges. The codex says senior members, but that's Dutch. I prefer *Anciens* because that's more picturesque. We're chasing the Walloons out of Flanders, but we do it in an open-minded way...

Well, I'll start at the beginning. To join the club, you have to live here in Leuven

²⁶ "*Tineke van Heule ons maartje, kan werken gelijk een paardje, kan melken, kan mesten, kan schuren gelijk de beste!*"

Tineke is the Flemish diminutive and hypocoristic form of *Tine* (Tina).

²⁷ Comrade in arms.

²⁸ *De bange nacht is weeral om, wij rijden stil, wij rijden stom, wij rijden ten verderve.*

and come from the same region, but we've already talked about that and being Flemish and Catholic. *Porren* aren't allowed. They only cause trouble... *Porren* are female students, just so you know. Where on earth have you been studying for the last three years...? All clubs from the same province belong to the same guild. So we're part of the Antwerp Guild. And all the guilds are under the SK, the Seniors' Convention²⁹. So all the Presidents are members of the SK, those of the KVHV³⁰, the guilds and the clubs. The head of the SK is the *Senior Seniorum*.³¹ As president of *Mother Geelse*³², I am of course also a member of the SK... Mother Emptiness would be a much better name for us if you look at the situation of the club coffers. We make a lot of money with our balls, but we're even much better at organising *rollings*.³³ What are they? You'll find out in due time. Just become a member first." Then he starts to laugh, "No, a promising one like you... I'd better do some more advertising... Well, my friend, there are different kinds of *rollings*, small and large. The general idea is what we did yesterday, just drifting from one pub to another. That's rolling in general. But there's also a second, more specific meaning, rolling in the narrower sense. In that case, we hire a bus and sing our way from one pub to another. The best thing is when the watchdog isn't at home, the master of the house, and when his harem are worth the trouble. First, we get them drunk on sherry after sherry, and then, when they start to feel lightheaded, we start dancing as intimately as possible: *Criminal Tango, in der Taverne, dunkle Gestalten, rote Laternen*.³⁴ In Scherpenheuvel we have such an address, a mother and five daughters and all of them equally wild. The least intelligent of us will be exposed

²⁹ In Flemish: *Seniorenkonvent*.

³⁰ The *Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverbond* Leuven (KVHV Leuven), abbreviated to "*Het Verbond*", is a conservative, Catholic and Flemish-minded student union in Leuven. The KVHV Leuven played a pioneering role in the Flemish struggle for emancipation.

³¹ The Presidents' President. By virtue of his position he was also vice-president of the KVHV.

³² The nomenclature of a student club at the University of Leuven is "Mother" (Dutch: "*Moeder*"), with a subsequent indication of the geographical provenance of its members.

³³ *Rollingen* are outings, the costs of which are borne by the club's funds. The singular form is "*rolling*", whereas the plural form is "*rollingen*". The etymology of the term suggests that it is derived from the English verb "to roll", which is defined as "to wallow in pleasure".

³⁴ *Criminal Tango in the tavern/Shady figures, red lanterns*.

"*Kriminaltango*" (Criminal tango) is a traditional pop song released in 1959. The Italian original by Piero Trombetta achieved only modest success, whereas the German version by Hazy Osterwald became a huge hit in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The song describes scenes from a tavern, juxtaposing the appearance of shady characters ("*dunkle Gestalten*") and their mysterious dealings with dancing tango ("*Und sie tanzen einen Tango*"). The song culminates with a shot in the dark and the arrival of the police, who are unable to gather any evidence.

for who they are with their *chansons de geste*.³⁵ Flirting only works if you stay calm and confident, if you make them swoon with real jokes. And somewhere between Aarschot and Westerlo stands 'the Horse Mouth's stable'. Velsen discovered its barmaid on one of his prospecting trips. She's definitely got what it takes to be in the Guinness Book of Records. She can fit more than thirty bear mats between her teeth! Try it yourself. If you do, they'll have to smash your mouth shut with a sledgehammer afterwards."

He grins devilishly.

"When this place closes, we storm the places with the blue-red window lights. *Just come in, she said, come upstairs, she said, come play, she said, with my twat. Pay first, she said, otherwise, I'll kick you, she said, under your balls, she said, down the stairs.* Then, off the bus and jogging in, so they don't have a chance to barricade the place! Then we make a bit of a spectacle! That of about 20 Vikings laying siege to the nuns. Initially everything's pretty peaceful, we've got beer, and we're having a good time dancing with these ladies. But then a few headstrong simpletons get bored and start dragging out everything that isn't too heavy. Then all hell breaks loose. The nuns start pushing and kicking anything that moves, yelling as loudly as they can, 'Bastards! Motherfuckers!' I'm not usually into this kind of entertainment, but I can understand why others are, considering the prices these girls dare charge for a single drink. And of course, some of us want a souvenir, like an ashtray or a tablecloth. Or maybe a nice beer glass or a flower pot. It's the cheapest way to dress up your *kot*, especially when you're skint. Lingerie would be the coolest of plunders, of course, but our group is too big and our wallets too small. We all drink from the club's till...

There are usually a few hustlers around, but they shouldn't expect us to be considerate. Especially when they're too busy admiring the champagne and the empty glass across the table. The inspiration we draw from that situation! 'Wasting the child benefit again' is still innocent, but then comes the big gun: 'Home sweet home. There's nothing like home. There's no dad like daddy... so good at shagging.'...

But let's not forget the good eggs in there, like the diplomats and the comedians. But more often than not, they turn out to be sneaky, thick-skinned or cowardly

³⁵ The *chanson de geste* (Old French for 'song of heroic deeds', from Latin: *gesta* 'deeds, actions accomplished') is a medieval narrative, a type of epic poem that appears at the dawn of French literature. The earliest known poems of this genre are dated from the late 11th and early 12th centuries, shortly before the emergence of the lyric poetry of the troubadours and trouvères, and the earliest verse romances. The period between 1150 and 1250 saw the highest level of acceptance.

collaborators, making the saying all the more relevant... Which one? This one: when your dick is hard, your brains are in your balls. If they had any brains, they'd be bribing us with drinks, but instead they're just sulking behind their bottle of champers with red, sour faces. Usually, they don't keep playing the victim for more than half an hour. Those who are still sitting there are loudly suspected of extraordinary horniness and unrelenting lust. Or of just being cheapskates: 'It's paid for, so it must be emptied?' *Einkesseln und ausradieren!*³⁶ We get on their nerves until they get a heart attack. Jacques Brel at the roll call: *Les bourgeois c'est comme les cochons: plus ça devient vieux, plus ça devient bête.*³⁷ Then we sing our *Pappenheimer* dropping our trousers. Even a dyed-in-the-wool madam gets nervous in front of such a square of halberdiers with lances in all stages of lowering."

"You've never been through a terrible beating?"

"No, but we've had our fair share of run-ins with the pimps. One time, one of them came at us with a gun. His jukebox was already in the car park next to the bus. Boy, how fast we were then! We would never have been able to get the machine inside, but that wasn't essential. What was essential was the siren next to him that kept wailing.

But situations like this are actually quite rare. Usually, we just have a beer. At least that way they earn something, because for their regulars, the atmosphere is ruined anyway. And if they don't want to see it, we're happy to point it out to them. We remind them that they should feel sorry for their poor kids, who are starving at university while cramming for exams, while they themselves are here, wasting money. Or we might sing a tear-jerker that caused a stir some time ago: '*Daddy, oh don't do this, please. Think of your children, think of your wife, can't you see they are crying for you?*'³⁸ We'd sing it with tears in our eyes and a handkerchief at the ready to wipe them away. Or we appeal to their better nature with the tender '*A sunny light plays through my dwelling. I feel like a little king in my great duty*', meanwhile indicating with our hands the size of a colossal phallus. '*Would one suffer poverty by buying a round for everyone? Ah, where men struggle, the Lord lends a hand.*'³⁹

³⁶ Surround and exterminate!

³⁷ The middle classes are like pigs: The older they get, the stupider they become.

³⁸ *Vader ach laat dat nou/Denk aan je kinderen denk aan je vrouw/Vader ach laat dat nou/Zie je dan niet dat ze huilen om jou.* (by Blonde Sjaantje)

³⁹ From *Hemelhuis* (Heaven's House). Lyrics by René De Clercq; music by Emiel Hullebroeck. *Door mijn woning/Speelt een zonnig licht/'k Voel m'een kleine koning/In mijn grote plicht... Zou men*

He waits for me to finish laughing.

"Don't worry, you've got the right feeling. Now, let's get to the nitty-gritty. In a club, you've got the presidium with the President, the Vice-President, the Father of the Pledges and the *Abactis*. And, of course, the Quaestor, the Treasurer.

According to the Codex, the Vice-President should be the Pledge Father, but we like to think the more the merrier. So one in four is in the presidency... An *Abactis* is a secretary. Surely you learned Latin at school? We've also got a Censor to keep everyone happy, and a *Procantor*⁴⁰ to drown out the bad singers."

"Do you guys really sing that much?"

"When it's a club, we sing practically half the evening. Sometimes we have a special cantus. Do you like singing? Then you'll get your money's worth. We're pretty dedicated, me, the Fat Man and Pear Sachs von DKW."

"What kind of songs do you sing?"

"Anything and everything. The club anthem, student songs, drinking songs, whatever's in the *Studentencodex*.⁴¹ Do you like opera? You do? I'm surprised. You must be joking! Another one!"

"Are there others too?"

"We're obsessed with it. Majestic plural. This could be fun, Pledge."

"Hey, who says I'm in?"

"I do. You don't have anything to add. *Silentium triplex*.⁴² You're a Pledge now, and you'll stay that way until your hazing at the end of the year. You get to choose a godfather from among the *Anciens*. They should tutor you in your studies, haha! Sort of. So just choose whoever you want. You could go for Auwera, for example. He's the one who's on a mission to pull others out of the ditch. Sorry, I didn't mean it like that, haha. Although...

As a Pledge, you've got to obey the President and the *Anciens*. *Lex dura, sed lex*.⁴³ You'll also need to buy a hat, a stripe and a codex. These are compulsory. You can get them from us – we sell them ourselves. Just remember that Pledges wear their stripes on the left over their shoulders, and *Anciens* wear them on the right. If you

armoe lijden/Om een mondje meer? (Would one suffer poverty for the sake of one more mouth to feed?)
/Och, waar mensen strijden/Helpt de Heer.

⁴⁰ Precentor.

⁴¹ The *Studentencodex* is the most widely used commercium songbook in the Flemish part of Belgium. The preponderance of students utilise the editions published by the *Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverbond* (KVHV). The collection is comprised of three sections: the corpsbook, which contains songs from the most fraternities; the *clubcodex* (blue pages); and a section comprising over three hundred songs.

⁴² Triple silence!

⁴³ [The] law [is] harsh, but [it is the] law.

wear your stripes the wrong way round, you get a punishment pint."

"I don't know..."

"They won't throw you out of the house, will they?"

"No, I'm already out."

"Really? And you've still got money for a place like this? You must be very well off! But don't worry. It's not on to drink at the expense of a *commilito*, that's against the code of honour... *Voilà*. That's all, folks. No more excuses. You like to sing and you like to drink and sometimes, in your stupidity, you say something that can be laughed at. Come and join us! There are brothers in arms waiting for you, comrades, *commilitones*! Sing your heart out to get rid of your misery! Wasn't this night bad enough?"

"But I don't know anyone."

"I'll make sure you do. Listen, Pledge."

Mother Geelse

"Pear Sachs von DKW plays the saxophone and chases women – just like Gunther Sachs von Opel, Brigitte Bardot's teddy bear, but he drives a DKW. He's a small guy, pretty slim, with light brown hair, a gentle disposition and no chin. He likes to practise naked and slightly drunk. Then he pounds the beat on the floor while his sausage swings back and forth like a metronome. He started out with *Tantum Ergo*⁴⁴ and has now joined forces with Fats Domino. Before the holidays he called from Herent to the Bacchus, our club pub on the Oude Markt. His car had broken down in the rain. When we got there, there were already two cars from *Wegenhulp Touring Club*⁴⁵ and four mechanics. They couldn't get it going. They'd cleaned everything, the spark plug, the carburettor. Puhvrooh, it said, and turned off. 'Hey,' said one of the mechanics after another inspection, 'you're driving without a cap on the tank.'

'It doesn't matter anyway,' said Pear Sachs. 'I've put a piece of plastic over it with a rubber band.'

'If you put your condom on like that, you'll have lots of babies,' the other said. So that's one. He's got a thing going on with a rich girl in the provinces who's set on having a doctor. She's not unpleasant, mind you; a beautiful dark blonde, but yes... rather reserved. So, here in Leuven, he's chasing after a 15-year-old girl who's as wild as a hare and cheats on him in front of him. And yet there's something about her, he says. Yeah, suppose there was nothing at all! What do you think? Can you live with that?"

"See," he says, pleased. "And that's just the first one. Here's number two, Fat Willy. In a previous life he was *primus perpetuus* at "The Sty" in Mol, the Sint-Jan Berchmanscollege.⁴⁶ I went there too, but a year before him. Last May, in the

⁴⁴ The "*Tantum ergo*" is the incipit of the final two verses of the *Pange lingua*, a medieval Latin hymn. The hymn is intoned during the veneration and blessing of the Blessed Sacrament in the Catholic Church and other denominations that share this devotion.

⁴⁵ Touring is a Belgian motorists' association that also provides roadside assistance and insurance. The association has an impressive membership of 500,000 individuals who are required to pay an annual membership fee. In return, they are entitled to access a comprehensive roadside assistance service.

⁴⁶ In Flanders, a college is a secondary educational establishment that provides general education. The term "*primus perpetuus*" (plur. *primi perpetui*) is derived from the Latin phrase "*primus perpetuus*", which translates to "always first". In the 20th century, this term was frequently employed in Flemish secondary schools (primarily colleges) to denote a pupil who had been first in a particular subject or in all subjects for six consecutive years. Following the conclusion of the sixth year, the pupil was duly

middle of the night, he and Herman Baerts from the *Mastentop*⁴⁷ were caught peeing in the letterbox of the Rector's office by some cops. The Fat Man thought it was really unfair that he should get a police report for something like that, so he argued with them that it was a tradition and that otherwise he would lose his credibility as a student. They weren't having any of it, but the Fat Man can't stand injustice, so he told the fanatic one, 'You're a wayward simpleton.' Public drunkenness, indecency and insulting an officer of the law. The policeman wrote diligently as the Fat Man read over his shoulder. 'Hey,' he said, 'wayward is not with a t like you think, but with a d.' Bam, boom, with the truncheon against his dome. The Fat Man was now really in a bad mood. They handcuffed him and dragged him to the office next to the town hall and up the stairs to the first floor. There he was hit again with the truncheon, again by the same guy. The Fat Man shoved him with his fat body and the other one fell down the stairs and broke his leg. Then they threw him in a police cell. After a bit of back and forth, they let him call home. His dad is the chief of police in Meerhout. He drove to Leuven in the middle of the night. The case was dropped and dad paid the bills."

His laughter fills the room. It's impressive to think you can be so funny! But he's definitely likeable!

"Haha, hahaha! In July last year, he failed his exams and was grounded. He lost four kilos, but that wasn't enough. One night he snuck out for a beer. When he got back, he found the place locked up tight – all the doors and windows. He went to the sliding window in the kitchen, just above the gas fire. 'It came down like a guillotine,' he said. He spread his arms out, boom bam, the kettle off the burner, a lot of banging and the whole kitchen flooded. His dad stormed in in his underpants with a gun in his hand. He let him dangle. The Fat Man moaned that they had to help him, and his dad did. He locked him in a police cell with his classes every morning, and only let him out for lunch in the afternoon and to sleep at night. He passed *magna cum laude*...⁴⁸

Ha, you can laugh about that! There you go! Here's another one for you, Jeff Bazoom, always losing at poker. If you can't afford the bus fare on Friday... He's a

honoured. This was generally accompanied by a ceremony in which the *primus perpetuus* was presented with a crown or laurel wreath and a pile of prize books.

⁴⁷ The term is derived from the literal meaning of the word, which refers to a pine cone. Pines are the most prevalent form of vegetation in the Kempen region. The term "*Mastentop*" refers to the Leuven student club, which comprises members from the Turnhout, Herentals and Westerlo regions.

⁴⁸ The Latin phrase "*cum laude*" is used to indicate that an individual has passed their university or doctoral examinations with high marks. Other terms employed for this accomplishment include "*magna cum laude*" (with high praise) and "*summa cum laude*" or "*maxima cum laude*" (the highest praise).

top guy, always studying and loves to study. That's why he always repeats the year's work at least once. According to the myth, he's got only one ball... Only according to the myth, my friend. Mythical heroes are always deformed. Take Heracles, for example. He was a transvestite with three rows of teeth. Or Theseus. He was a serial killer who raped Helen, Ariadne and all the girls in peplum dresses he came across during his wanderings. Do you remember how we used to translate their adventures at the Catholic college with its priests?⁴⁹ In a sanitised version, haha...

One time in Betekom we were chasing two barmaids in miniskirts. Jeff didn't make any attempt. He just put on his new sunglasses. It was the middle of the night and it was chucking it down. Those pussycats couldn't keep their hands off him. 'In the land of the impotents, One-Ball is king,' he said.

He and Teyckmans are always at loggerheads when Stef loses a game of colour whist. At one point, Jeff got so fed up with his bickering that he said to him, 'Stef, you're a walking billboard for toothpaste.' This didn't go down well with Stef, whose teeth are as rotten as those of Ramses II's mummy.

Stef is mates with the White Buysmans, who ran for president of the Antwerp Guild last year. We put in a big push because the three Antwerp clubs always team up, and the Rupel club... well, you can't really rely on them. We often have to team up with the Dolphins of Lier and the Mastentop. Our President, Pol Greco, made an alliance like that during the break. Our allies would vote for Guy in exchange for our support for a Dolphin in the Treasurer's election. This Dolphin was *honoris causa* at the Mastentop and at the Rupel. We'd keep the Antwerpers sweet with the vice-presidency, even though it's not much in terms of power and prestige, and everyone would be happy. It was like forming a government. There was one more thing on the agenda: the candidates' speeches. That Sinjoria guy came up with the usual platitudes about working together and action for *Leuven Vlaams*.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Flemish Catholic secondary school.

⁵⁰ Flemish (Vlaams) is a variety of Dutch. The Flemish students and the majority of the Flemish professors at the Catholic University of Leuven demanded that the university administration (i.e. the Belgian bishops) comply with the 1962 language law that had been passed by parliament and came into force in 1963. The francophone bishops, with the support of the francophone wings of all the major parties (the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal parties), were resolute in their refusal to relocate the francophone wing of the university to the francophone side of the language boundary established by the language law. The legislation also stipulated that the languages of administration and education in the Flemish and Walloon Regions had to be the official language of that Region (the Brussels Region was considered bilingual), but made an exception – a characteristic of Belgian legislation – for the French-speaking wing of KU Leuven. This exception provoked considerable indignation among many Flemings, as it afforded the French-speaking wing the opportunity to persist in the systematic Frenchification of the Flemish-speaking area around Leuven, thereby undermining the language law.

Everything was fine. Guy's not the most eloquent of speakers either, but he didn't need to say more than a few words. He pulled two full sheets of paper out of his pocket, damn it! We could see the catastrophe coming. He was setting off a fireworks display that would never end. Everyone has to stand to give a speech. To give him a chance to save face, Pee Vlaeminck set fire to his papers with his lighter. Guy carried on chatting until the flames touched his fingers. Instead of laughing, he became furious. Poor Guy, he'd worked so hard. Anything can be forgiven a president except a lack of humour. The election was a mess. Guy was finished. He just became nothing: the disappointment was too great...

Still not satisfied? Hey mate, you're a real pain. Luckily I've got two more. White Velsen and Jef Spaepen, both from Geel. Spaepen is in his second year of Criminology. I'm not sure what Velsen is studying. I doubt he knows either. He's also a Pledge, just like you. He's a head of salt and pepper, with a face full of freckles and as pale as a slate. I've said it before that we are tolerant. Last year at carnival, they got dressed up as brown-clad Fathers. They walked barefoot through the city all night until the White collapsed from exhaustion in the morning. At the Bacchus, he laid his head on the table and fell asleep. Spaepen, on the other hand, turned out to be a real heavy hitter. He carried on drinking and kept on going with his preaching. Then, all of a sudden, he spotted his buddy lying down, crawled onto the bench next to him and threw his habit over his head. We heard it splash. *Dominus vobiscum*.⁵¹ The White trembled with pleasure, for it was freezing cold outside, but he did not wake up...

In the middle of the morning, the whole group went to St Pieter's. We had to get an ash cross, a real Ash Wednesday cross. Spaepen, as a member of the First Estate, was allowed to lead the way. He stumbled through the crowd. 'I'm sorry! God will reward you.' Then he fell to his knees in front of the priest and blew his stinking breath in his face.

'Go away,' said the priest. 'You're drunk.'

'I'm not drunk,' said Jef. 'I'm a good Catholic and I've come for my cross.'

'Get out of here,' the priest said, shoving him on the shoulder.

Jef rolled to the side with his legs up. He had no underpants on. He'd told us in the Bacchus that it would be quite a challenge to get his penis through his fly if he encountered a nun. Those brides of Christ were now sighing and groaning with their hands in front of their faces among the other people around them. Some of

⁵¹ The salutation "The Lord be with you" is an ancient benediction that has been employed by the clergy in the Masses of the Catholic Church and other liturgical ceremonies, as well as in the liturgies of other Western Christian denominations, including Lutheranism, Anglicanism and Methodism.

them hissed that it was a disgrace and that the police should be called. Spaepen scrambled to his feet and we all fled the church...

Damn, you still not satisfied? Gosh, this has never happened before! OK, then! One more! Once we were in the Bacchus, Freddy, the Emperor of China, Simon, Bazoom and I, and we had all just come from a tea dance given by the Pedagogues. Boy that was a disaster! Not a single free *por* left and the rest were just fat necks! Freddy was bullshitting about being a pharmacist and Bazoom a civil engineer and me a notary! It was a total waste of time. Lempereur⁵² told one of the girls who was rattling a little too conspicuously with his crown jewels, 'I'll seal you in the Great Wall of China.' Anyway, we went back to the Bacchus empty-handed and with empty pockets, while the other pubs were getting rid of their customers. We made it just in time, there was still space at the bar. Julien, as usual, was running back and forth with a goulash so hot it burns your whole mug, and just then a *Westfluut* tried to sneak out. A *Westfluut* is a West-Fleming⁵³, you innocent soul. Julien jumped out of his kitchen like a tiger. 'Hey, you, stop! Catch him! Stop him!' He grabbed him at the door just in time.

We sat down at the bar, two of us – Freddy Peeters and I – close together, and the rest of us standing behind us two, beer in hand. Freddy is also studying Pharmacy, just like you, but in his fourth year. Next to him was a young couple, a tall guy with glasses and a blonde with a round face. Simon gave Fred a nudge and Fred, shocked, hit her arm with his elbow. She looked at him as if she had been sexually assaulted. 'S-s-sorry,' Freddy said, because he stutters when women are involved. Then he had to go to the back..."

"The back?"

"To pee, man. You really have a lot to learn. When he got back, Long Simon was sitting on his stool. Fred's a good-natured, round man with thick glasses. 'Stay there,' he said, holding out his hand for his beer between Simon and the blonde who was with her elbows on the bar, staring at the glasses in the case. Her beau had put all his change into the jukebox and was completely absorbed in Aznavour.⁵⁴ She couldn't say the same for herself. She lowered herself halfway to the side until she was lying against him. Then they were both out of this world. Julien, the devil, was standing diagonally in front of them, with his hands on the tap and his cigarette under his nose, signalling to us all the time, and then we saw it

⁵² The surname Lempereur is of French origin, deriving from the French term *l'empereur*, which translates as 'the emperor'.

⁵³ A resident of the province of West-Flanders.

⁵⁴ French singer and songwriter of Armenian descent.

too. Fred had taken possession of her right breast. At least as far as he could, for she was well endowed. She was wearing only a thin blouse and trousers that were clearly filled with hunger. You should have seen him, the bandit, standing there smiling! She probably never knew who had got her knickers wet. And St Innocent even less, given the look on his face as she attacked him. He was determined to listen to the records while she was determined to go home. Neither of them understood, but she won.

'The cribber⁵⁵ saved him a lot of work," Julien said. 'She was as ripe as a pear.'

'Yeah,' Freddy said, 'I should make it my job.'

"It's a great practical," Bazoom said, grinning. 'How to milk your neighbour's cow.'

'You can see from such an affair that mind and body are not the same thing,' said the Emperor of China. 'Fred paws her so expertly that she gets off while her thoughts are completely focused on the other guy.' What do you reckon? Is there really no one you like?"

"Sure, lots of them. Are there really no serious ones among them?"

"You don't understand. We're all serious, seriously disordered. Let me give you another example... At the Lempereurs, at Ludo's, they've got loads of money, but when he asked for a bit more because he couldn't make ends meet – and it had nothing to do with drinking – he got so little they could keep it all for all he cared. He came back here with only a shirt, a pair of trousers, a jacket, a pair of socks and some underwear. He has no shoes, but he wears the same boots all year round. He works in a restaurant in the afternoon and in the evening as a waiter in the café across the street, wearing the owner's clothes. He pays for everything himself: his room, his food, his textbooks, his registration and tuition fees, even his exams. He's in his third year of law school. Last July he walked into the Bacchus just after lunch. 'Tineke, can you please mend my trousers?' he asked. Tineke is Julien's mistress. 'They're torn, I've got exams. I've got an appointment with the professor in twenty minutes.'

'Just go to the toilet and throw them over the door.'

The tear was on the side, a loose seam. Tineke mended the trousers and we threw them back over the door. He came out, the trousers torn again. This time it was in the crotch. Not surprising after a year of living on chips and beer. There wasn't much time for a proper repair. Tineke went looking for all the safety pins she had

⁵⁵ Julien's former occupation was that of a butcher. Consequently, his term "*klopper*" (Dutch for a horse having convulsions due to poor digestion and therefore biting into rack and cot with its front teeth) is likely to have been used metaphorically to describe a bad-tempered person, a disagreeable person, a troublemaker, a troublesome child, a miser, or a cheapskate.

in the house and Simon crawled between Ludo's legs to contain his sex appeal. Then it was off to the professor's, with Fred and Simon coming along for support. Ludo's got nerves of steel. Everything went smoothly. The exam was over. He went out. But then the toe of one of his boots got stuck behind the linoleum! 'Sir, you're forgetting something,' said the professor. Ludo bent down and the professor lay flat on his desk, roaring with laughter. 'Sorry. Bye, Professor', and he walked out with the sole in his hand. He had passed."

"Just sign me up. I'll become a member."

Student Pub Bacchus

The Old Market is a long, unevenly paved rectangle that gradually rises in width. Our pub is at the very back of the lower side, a few dozen metres from the Josephites college.⁵⁶ Through the window, we, the Bacchinides, can see the Rectory, a classicist building from the 18th century with a flat, grey, linear design, flanked by a series of stepped gables, including that of an old pharmacy owned by an old Catholic bigot who, for no apparent reason but with a face of Old Testament disgust, refuses to sell condoms to students over the age of 20. On the far right is the *Duc Jean*, a small restaurant on the corner of the narrow Krakenstraat, which drops steeply down to the square.

The pub is shaped like a pipe with two bulges. Out front, there's a four-by-four catacomb, covered in green sacking and split into two by old tables and benches in green fake leather. Behind it, a dark wooden wall juts out to create a narrow passageway with the plain black bar, then it recedes at right angles to form the front of a gloomy cave around a converted fireplace. So, where's the toilet, then, female newbie? Wiggle your tummy between the wooden wall and our welcoming buttocks on the bar stools, poor lost child with your too-small bladder. To the left of the jukebox is the delivery room.

Through the adjacent kitchen door wafts the smell of boiling leeks and tomatoes, roasting meat and splashing fried eggs into the taproom. Welcome to the student pub Bacchus.

The coffee machine is whirring away at the front of the bar. When someone enters, Tineke or Julien have to bend far to the right to see what kind of person they're going to deal with. He's there in the evening and overnight, while she's on the morning and afternoon shifts. The Geelse are at their best between ten and one in the evening. At night, the desperados come flooding in, having been kicked out by heartless publicans.

Julien's a stocky, robust guy with a round head, brown-grey hair combed flat back, brown-rimmed glasses and grey stubble that, shaved in the afternoon, always

⁵⁶ The Institute of the Josephites of Belgium (Latin: *Institutum Iosephitarum Gerardimontensium*) is a Roman Catholic clerical religious congregation of pontifical right for men devoted to the Christian education of young people. The foundation of the institution in question took place in the Belgian city of Ghent in 1817, under the auspices of Canon van Crombrughe. Members of the Institute affix the nominal letters "C.J." after their names in order to indicate their membership of the aforementioned Institute.

makes a spectacular comeback in the evening. He's always got a cigarette in his mouth, which protrudes from his pursed lower lip to just below the tip of his nose. "Hah, the cribber!" he greets customers he likes. But whiners and bad payers get a different welcome, "Hah, the sucker!" He's pretty relaxed about people who suit his taste, even if they're in debt up to their eyeballs, but if he suspects you of anything, watch out! The day before yesterday, Guy Buysmans was having a heated argument with him because he claimed he had charged him twice for a drink. They had a proper go at each other, Guy in front of the bar and Julien behind it, until Guy said Julien was a thief. No sooner had he said it than Guy was hanging over the bar, his brand new silk shirt totally ripped down his back. When he got up, he threatened to sue and go to court, but Julien just laughed in his face.

Greco, on the other hand, a blond giant of a man studying economics, can always count on him for help. He needed it badly when he got drunk and annoyed a bunch of Fish Market pimps. They were sitting at the front table playing cards when Pol started giving the vicious moustache some advice, "You have to trump. With the Jack of Spades." And even though the tension was getting thicker and thicker, he kept going, "No, you idiot, not the seven of spades, you have to play the Queen." He stood there with a grinning face and a confident attitude, swaying back and forth with a beer in his hand and the arrogance of a footballer playing in front of his home crowd: Who's got the nerve to mess with me? Nothing can happen to me! The little devil roars upright, glasses clatter, the glory of *Economica*⁵⁷ falls to the ground as three pimps kick him in the flanks. Julien runs to the butcher's bench. "Hah, you want to play!" He hits the first pimp on the muzzle, the second one gets the legs kicked from underneath him, and the third one is held in a stranglehold. Then they all get kicked, punched and thrown out the door. Then the wounds are disinfected: Julien's right calf is bleeding from a rat bite.

The club accepts me when I try, half-drunk, to take part in their verbal battles. If you just say stupid things, they scratch under their armpits or start singing, "He's the best we've ever had, ha-ha."

Van der Auwera – first Licentiate⁵⁸ in Germanic Languages – likes me. He never calls me a Pledge or a stupid Pledge. When I'm struggling to keep up in the back and forth, he steps in for me. I'm on the verge of tears in those moments, ready to

⁵⁷ The Faculty Circle of Economics Students.

⁵⁸ The first Licentiate (Year) is currently the inaugural year of the Master's programme. The licentiate was the academic degree below the doctorate. The award was also conferred by a number of other European universities.