



'Whom should I accuse but that accursed Reynard,  
the source of untold misery to me and mine?'

'Beasts & Men folk tales collected in Flanders  
and illustrated by Jean de Bosschère'  
London, William Heinemann, 1918

'A Max De Vos'  
A novel by Liam Gillick

## Chapter 1

'If you don't use your head, you'll use your wallet.'

Belgian Proverb

## PILLOWS CITY HOTEL

Parochiaansstraat 15/23

1000 Brussels, Belgium

The Palais des Beaux-Arts, located below the main streets that surround it, ranks therefore among the exceptional monuments which by their insurmountable defects or their insurmounted faults are exposed to criticism that in a normal situation would have been avoided. Theoretically, it is suffocating in its belt of retaining walls and shops that line its streets; it gets stuck in the aquiferous sand of its soil; it crashes under a servitude of views imposed for the conservation of the urban landscape visible from the Place des Palais.

Brussels was in a certain sense the ancient capital of Brabant, as Bruges and Ghent were the ancient capitals of West and East Flanders. It grew up (as early as the 8th century) on the banks of the little river Senne, whose course through its midst is now masked by the modern Inner Boulevards, built on arches above the unseen stream. The Senne is one of the numerous rivers which flow into the Schelde, and the original town clustered close round its banks, its centre being marked by the Grand-Place and the church of St. Nicolas. Unlike Bruges and Ghent, however, Brussels has always been rather an administrative than a commercial centre. It is true, it had considerable trade in the Middle Ages, as its fine Hôtel de Ville and Guild Houses still attest; but it seems to have sprung up round a villa of the Frankish kings, and it owed at least as much to its later feudal lords, the Counts of Louvain, afterwards Dukes of Brabant, and to their Burgundian successors, as to its mercantile position. The Senne was never a very important river for navigation, though, like most of the Belgian waterways, it was ascended by light craft, while a canal connected the town with the Schelde and Antwerp: but the situation of Brussels on the great inland trade route between Bruges or Ghent and Cologne gave it a certain mercantile value. Bruges, Ghent, Brussels, Louvain, Maastricht, and Aix-la-Chapelle all formed stations on this important route, and all owed to it a portion of their commercial prestige.

The burgher town which was thus engaged in trade and manufacturing was Flemish in speech and feeling, and lay in the hollow by the river and the Grand-Place. But a lordly suburb began to arise at an early date on the hill to eastward, where the Counts of Louvain built themselves a mansion, surrounded by those of the lesser nobility. After 1380, the Counts migrated here from too democratic Louvain. Later on, in the fifteenth century, the Dukes of Burgundy (who united the sovereignty of Brabant with that of Flanders) often held

their court here, as the population was less turbulent and less set upon freedom than that of purely commercial and industrial Bruges and Ghent. Thus the distinctive position of Brussels as the aristocratic centre and the seat of the court grew fixed. Again, the Dukes of Burgundy were French in speech, and surrounded themselves with French knights and courtiers; to suit the sovereigns, the local nobility also acquired the habit of speaking French, which has gradually become the language of one half of Belgium. But the people of the Old Town in the valley were, and are still, largely Flemish in tongue, in customs, in sympathies, and in aspect; while the inhabitants of the Montagne de la Cour and the court quarter generally are French in speech, in taste, and in manners. We will trace in the sequel the gradual growth of Brussels from its nucleus by the river (the Lower Town), up the side of the eastern hill to the Palace district (the Upper Town), and thence through the new Quartier Leopold and the surrounding region to its modern extension far beyond the limits of the medieval ramparts. Choose a hotel in the airy and wholesome Upper Town, as near as possible to the Park or the Place Royale. St. Michael the Archangel is the patron saint of Brussels: he will meet you everywhere, even on the lampposts. For the patroness, St. Gudula, see under the Cathedral.

There was rejoicing among the Artists Committee, for it was said that Max de Vos, sly, spiteful Max De Vos had at last repented of their misdeeds and resolved to lead a new life. Such a thing was, indeed, very hard to believe, but nevertheless everybody said that it was true. Certainly De Vos was seen no more in their usual drinking haunts, or about the Bozar opening parties. The news went round that they had put on the robe of piety and had vowed to become a curator, endeavouring to atone, by study and research, for all the sins of which they had been guilty.

At the Bozar Artists Committee, De Vos's change of heart was the one topic of conversation. A few of the artists and curators frankly expressed their doubts of the sincerity of such a tardy repentance, but the majority were quite willing to accept it, for, as a rule, one believes what one wishes to believe.

While the subject was still being eagerly discussed by the people around The Chair of the Artists Committee, the sound of wailing was heard, and a strange procession was seen making its way towards Bozar. At the head of the procession marched The Community Organizer, dressed in the deepest mourning and sobbing miserably, with bowed head. Behind them, borne by two interns, was a restorer's trolley on which was stretched the headless body of a beautiful artist, one of their performance artists, and all the gallery guards followed the restorer's trolley, raising their voices to heaven in grievous lamentation. At this sad sight the whole Bozar Artists Committee stood in amazement, and many of the artists wept in sympathy with the bereaved Organizer, who advanced towards the Bozar Artists Committee's Chair, crying for justice.

## Chapter 2

'It is no use waiting for your ship to  
come in unless you have sent one out.'

Belgian Proverb

## LUCCA RESTAURANT

Ravensteinstraat 1

1000 Brussel, Belgium

The land where the Coperbeek meandered its limpid waters in distant times and which it floods, from the embankments brought there, since the reign of the dukes, by the Ghetto of the Jews first, then the bourgeois and then the nobles who built their luxurious residences there; the land where David Teniers made his home and where the Great Oath, on powerful retaining walls, raised terraces for his shooting exercises, has only preserved rare vestiges over the course of its many transformations: one of the towers of the the first fortified wall of Brussels, on which leans the Errera Mansion and its outbuildings; a door jamb of one of the private mansions, embedded in a fragment of the old retaining wall of the garden of the Court of Auditors and a white stone well built in what was probably the garden of Teniers, currently covered by the floor of the Concert Hall. As for the remains of the wall butted up by butt vaults of the crossbowmen's terrace, which later became the garden of the Heger boarding school, only a few photographs have remained.

Two peas. Always two peas. And never hidden. Even on those rare occasions when there is the hint of more, digging around in the spaghetti only reveals two peas. Two peas. Is each couple of peas kept in a separate container? Are they measured out precisely by hand from a bag or a bowl? It's too complicated to count the strands of spaghetti. And the little lumps of pancetta are always random. But peas. Two peas.

Max looked up from his lunch, past the glass of Veneto. The construction site across the street was still. A white Volkswagen Caddy was parked right in front of a white Volkswagen Caddy. The restaurant is open until three every afternoon. Then closes again until five. There would be plenty of time to sit and eat and think and wait. Every few minutes another man in a black suit, white shirt and black tie – hunched by the weight of a leather shoulder bag – would scoot rapidly past the window.

De Vos liked this place. It was close to Bozar but quiet enough in its little side street to allow focus and ease. There was a Chinese place a little further down Ravensteinstraat. He had tried it. But Italian was better. Italian. Two peas. And a glass of wine. It was just after noon. So not too early. Later he would go to the suit shop – a ten minute walk. Cut through the Parc de Bruxelles? Better to take Naamsestraat. Suitsupply. They have a sale on – 150 Euro for a very discrete 'Italian' suit. De Vos had always been a nail sticking out from the crowd just asking to be hammered down. It was time to become more discrete. A grey business suit, white shirt, dark tie. It was time to act sincere and concentrate.

Those who are sincere will naturally tend to behave in ways that cohere with the great, official ethical traditions. Sincere people don't steal from others, or lie to them, or try to murder them. Sincere people do not do things that undermine the fabric of society or bring harm to the community or family.

Sincerity is the grounding of all ethical thought and behavior, in this view. Even where religion has long lists of do's and don'ts in its archives, only those with sincerity in their hearts will be prompted to live by the rules.

'Whom do you accuse?' asked the Chair.

'Whom should I accuse but that accursed De Vos, the source of untold misery to me and mine? You know, Chair of the Committee, none better, how we have suffered from their cruelty in the past. The story I now have to tell is a story of wrong that would bring tears to the eyes of a stone imagine a story of treachery such as would abash the Director themselves, a story so base that I can hardly bring myself to utter it!'

'Say on,' said the Chair of the Bozar Artists Committee, 'and rest content, for if what you say be true, De Vos shall receive their due reward I swear it by my terms of contract!'

'Comrade,' they continued, 'I had six media artists and fourteen performance artists. We all dwelt together in a communal space, a peaceable and happy family. The rigours of the winter were spent; spring had come again with its flowers and perfumes. The sun shone brightly, and insects abounded in our communal space. We dwelt in the midst of abundance; we were happy, and as we thought, safe, for a curator's six faithful interns guarded us from danger. Alas, for our beautiful hopes! A few days ago De Vos appeared cruel, black-hearted De Vos and at one fell swoop changed our happiness into misery.'

'This is how it all happened, Comrade. De Vos came to the communal space one fine morning and brought me a print out of an email bearing your own digital signature. I opened it, and read that you had recommended that all the creative people should hence forward live together in peace. An ordinance,

Comrade, such as would make the world a beautiful place – were it not for designers and architects! I gave the document back to De Vos, expressing my joy at the news it contained, whereupon De Vos said:

'My heart is full, Community Organizer, when I think of the cruelty with which I have treated you and your family in the past, but you need have no further fear. I have seen the error of my ways. Henceforth my life shall be given up to repentance and research. I have renounced all worldly artistic pleasures. Even now I am on my way to a remote curatorial programme where, in study and research, I shall endeavour to atone for my sins.'

Chapter 3

'Honour is better than honours.'

Belgian Proverb

LUCCA RESTAURANT  
Ravensteinstraat 1  
1000 Brussel, Belgium

Entirely in reinforced concrete, the construction was built in successive vertical parts, to balance the weight of the soil removed and to avoid a too fast clearing in the uncovered loose soil. The reinforced concrete was built such as are the visible forms of the ceilings in both concert halls and exhibition halls. In the former, the walls and infill partitions were made of hollow and spongy masonry; in the second, the masonry in fired and hard bricks serve to consolidate the whole of the building. With the exception of the sculpture hall, covered by arched reinforced concrete beams, all the frames of the exhibition halls and the concert hall are made of steel. The construction, almost the whole of which is 8.14 square meters. There is no service and ventilation course.

De Vos knew that this was the way it was supposed to be. But knew that this was not how it was. Something was festering. Something was wrong. Something was slowly eating at his soul.

Taking out a notebook De Vos slowly flipped through the pages. Lazily and gently folding the carbonara around his fork. Without thinking about it too much, he gently pushed the two peas to the side of the dish. He would save them for the last bite. Sincerely. Honestly. Deftly.

Lunch had to be strung out as long as possible. It was not easy. Lucca is a small place and not as busy as Paradiso closer to the centre and not as comfortable as Bocconi and definitely not as elegant and complicated as Il Passatempo near with its loud music and unctuous waiters. Lucca was not place to hide but it had good food and good service. To be honest, De Vos had overdone it a little. The first glass of wine had been followed by two more. And a grappa. Just before three a bit of standing and stretching, followed by a pause at the door to search for his keys. No good reason for that. But a good habit. The little key to the storage locker was still in the pocket.

Lunch. Very good too. Carpaccio di salmone con olio di oliva e limone. Insalata di rucola e parmigiano. Spaghetti carbonara. It was extremely well balanced. Looked soft. Tasted fresh. De Vos had no actual idea if it was any good compared to food in Italy. But it was a good day to think things were good and a good day for Belgian Italian food. Every day was good for that.

De Vos was about to make for the door when Donato Janssens came swiftly out of the kitchen nodding and making a rough joke about time and pleasure and food and Umbria. He was heading towards a man who was blocking De Vos's exit. The chef and the stranger held their arms out and clasped each other. The stranger wanted to know the whole story.