

## *The wood* – Jeroen Brouwers

For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?

Luke 23:31

### **Pages 9-13**

The habit irritates my skin.

The ragged garb of Francis of Assisi, who talked with wolves.

Brothers who have joined his monastic order wear his cassock, which has the shape of a cross. Fitted with a hood, it hangs heavy on the shoulders, reaches to the feet and envelops the entire body in faecal brown; the material is rough and chafes. One must wear undergarments to avoid being driven insane by itching, that tortures the naked flesh like termites. What does a monk wear beneath his habit? A waist-length smock, track-suit bottoms, underpants, all elasticated.

The scapular is draped over the habit. This is a width of cloth of the same length, material and colour as the habit, with a hole to put ones head through. Worn over the chest and back like a celebrant's chasuble. Everything has the same formless design, all a uniform Extra-Large, a one-size-fits-all, so that everything fits everybody.

On Saturday it all goes to the laundry, the domain of Plechelmus, who is tasked with handing out clean clothes in exchange. We lay Brothers,

emulating the example of our founder, keep no personal possessions, so none of our own clothes either. So we all take turns, the luck of the draw,

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in donning the smock, the underpants, the baggy garments, worn by a colleague the week before. I break the Order rules by never wearing the monastery's communal underpants.

Francis's ragged robe is gathered around the waist by a white cord with three knots in it, to remind us of the key principles by which he lived his life. Knot One: poverty. Knot Two: obedience. Knot Three: celibacy or chastity. Any takers? *Il poverello* bequeathed poems about it, they hang, framed, in the monastery refectory.

Early April, the Tuesday of holy week. Because the day before yesterday was Palm Sunday fresh sprigs of box hang behind all the crosses and stoups. Hardly spring and it has already been aggressively hot for days now as if my lord Brother Sun is spewing fury. Flaming heat like boiling puke, that permeates everywhere, even through the walls of the usually cool, almost chilly chapel. Here the sun hammers through the stained glass windows with their St. Francis scenes, the colours blanching in the light which strikes them like fire. As hot as the kitchen furnaces run by Severinus and his young helper, who has not yet been granted a religious name. If it's almost unbearable in the chapel how am I supposed to manage in my tiny room under the eaves, where I sit in my sweltering garb guarding the dormitory, surrounded by the hubbub of the boys in their cubicles.

The cubbyhole where I am tucked away is two by four between triplex walls, without a ceiling. As long as the naked bulb, that has slipped below the lampshade and now dangles underneath, continues to shine on my

table, it throws a square-shaped patch of light onto the ceiling of the dormitory above my cell. The light bulb is a very weak one. Nothing compared to the raging sun, and yet the heat, which even night-time cannot draw from my habit, seems to emanate from that tiny filament. I

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stare at the matt glow and feel thirsty, but the thermos flask, filled with tea by Severinus's galley cook, is empty –not a drop left. Unlike me. The cold bitter tea that I have swallowed in small sips pours out of my body in big drops, miserable body, it drips from head to toe. I have peeled off my smock and tracksuit bottoms, scapular too and the cord, though not the habit, obviously. My cubicle, like the others, is curtained off by a short piece of cloth, which only reaches to about a half a metre above the floor. Anyone leaving his bed, strictly forbidden except for urgent reasons, can see my bare feet in their Franciscan sandals, to indulge in any more nakedness is, as supervisor, not possible. So I sit, nude in the habit, chafed all over by its roughness, as if I am living in a jute sack. I try not to move and to bring the camelhair tent in contact with my flesh in as few places as possible, disgusting flesh that I ought to flay with the knotted cord. Forget it.

I have switched off the lamp. With circles of light behind my eyes I stare out of the window, which is open, although I should really leave it closed to shut out the heat.

The night is a black vault of explosive sultriness. No stars are visible. Sister moon is not there either. Below me is the playground with the chestnut trees. On the other side of the paved yard is the school building, where a light is still burning in the last window to the right on the second floor. This is Mansuetus's room, who pronounces his name Mansuuwaaytoos. Head

of senior school. Lads of twelve to sixteen, seventeen years old, whom I now watch over in this dormitory.

I can hear you, Bruinsma! As soon as I extinguish the lamp and the patch of light on the ceiling vanishes, the little scoundrels come to life. Bruinsma performs some energetic coughing. Ahem, harrumph. From another cubicle

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comes loud snorting. You too Weytjens! Go to sleep boy, this isn't a pigsty. I tap the table with the cross of my rosary. I am holding the thing in my hand just to hold something in my hand. We are supposed to finger our strings of beads while muttering our daily prayers, seeing as we are dedicated to the Holy Virgin according to the rules of Saint Francis, himself a rabid woman-hater, even though - according to apocryphal sources - he had something going with Saint Clara.

In the silence, now temporarily restored, the heat appears to be buzzing. The atmosphere as threatening beast. Beyond the school building the outside world, as we autistically refer to it, glimmers. The outside world includes the whole planet and the universe. Our complex of buildings forms a closed enclave, we live separately from the outside world, to which we do not belong - our grounds are enclosed by walls. We constitute an autonomous monastic community with its own boys' boarding school, our institute is called *Sint Jozef ter Engelen* (Saint Joseph of the Angels), situated in the farthest south east of the Netherlands. Around us lies the mining village of Blijderhagen, from where brass band music can sometimes be heard, muffled by distance. Occasional voices and laughter from people not unlike me on the other side of the walls. I am full of sinful rebellious thoughts and homesick longings that are in conflict with Knot Three. To the right the road ends at the border-crossing with Germany. Just about

there the light is on in Mansuetus's room. Two fluorescent tubes. The window where the light is shining is a yellow rectangle in the priest-black night, visible through the branches of the chestnuts. From where he is he probably won't be able to see my tiny lamp's paltry beam when it is on.

If you don't stop those disgusting sounds immediately, Weytjens! I don't shout. It resembles a penal colony here as it is. Brother? Yes, Weytjens? Mark Freelink still isn't here. Snort. Snort. Ahem. Muffled sniggering from

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various cubicles. Quiet! Go to sleep everyone! I drum on the table once more with the cross of rosary with its wooden beads. The bulb tinkles in its fitting, it resonates in the thermos flask.

I don't get up from my chair and grow impassive once more. Droplets on my ears and nose. One slides from my neck to my tailbone. Another from my breast to down there, where it itches. Monastery handkerchief for wiping and dabbing was already soaked by morning. The scrap of cloth is hanging behind my bed drying after I rinsed it out under the tap.

Fellow brothers in the potato and vegetable plots to the side of the buildings tie a knot in all four corners of the handkerchief and stretch it across the tops of their heads. God knows what else the fellows do with their handkerchiefs. Besides God I know too, for I do the same, preferably with a dry cloth—wet is not pleasant.

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## Pages 49-52

The wood

This was the definitive wood, even more feared by the schoolchildren than the wood brandished by the head of school up until then.

This type of bow \* is made of Pernambuco wood. It is slightly elastic, enabling lashing movements. If you sweep it through the air it produces a swishing sound.

Mansuetus, name-day 19 February, demonstrated this to me. Swish. Thwack. Scream. The boy bent over, Mansuetus's hand vice-like around the neck of the poor unfortunate, or around one of his arms twisted up and behind his shoulder blades so as to pinion him securely to the desktop; the other hand held aloft in order to bring down the wood with utmost force

\* footnote: the 'bow' referred to here is a cello bow. This is explained earlier in the novel.

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onto the backside. While doing it he bared his teeth in a grimace that increased the revulsion I felt still more. I averted my eyes from what was happening, my throat closed up because I was breathing in and out and swallowing simultaneously or something like that.

It happens like this: The boy screams and keeps screaming while the fellow brother, disciple of our patron saint, the gentle Francis, continues to beat

him, hard, still harder, the front flap of his scapular thrown over his shoulder to prevent it getting in the way of his movements and exertions. He bellows back. More volume, it seems, than the space with its dead light can accommodate. Obedience and discipline! You have no will! I have a will! You do my will! Each word accompanied by an ever harder stroke of the vicious wood. No matter how the boy squirms, the tutor, with studied precision, continues to hit exactly the same place on the buttocks, twenty times, more than twenty times. When I had to witness this I objected, without hearing my own voice amid the uproar: That is enough brother. The boy was howling like a dog, water, snot, dribble where his head remained pressed against the surface of the furniture, his legs kicking like a frog's.

Young boy in Hans Holbein's picture in Erasmus's 'In Praise of Folly'. Being given a spanking on his bare backside with a bunch of twigs. An enlarged reproduction hangs between two cupboards in Mansuetus's office, is in his direct line of vision when he looks up from his desk.

Acid and bile poured into my mouth. Mansuetus handed me the wood. Now you, Bonaventura. With his fingers beneath the lad's trouser belt, he tugged it higher and higher, until the short trousers were stretched tight over and between the fragile buttocks and the trouser legs no longer covered the back of the thighs, leaving the genitals exposed. This was the second time

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he had done this, he did the same before he began the punishment.

The way one hands a knife to someone, hilt first, that is how the swine thrust the knife at me, the handle aimed at my chest. Handle is not the correct word, he had once instructed me didactically – in musical

terminology , he said, a bow is held by the grip. Take hold of the grip and give this brazen miscreant six of the best right here, his eyes on the displayed flesh. I shook my head resolutely, not taking the proffered bow with its trailing strands of old wives hair, and looked him in the eye.

Said nothing, despite being on the point of saying a great deal. I bit it back and tasted something which reminded me of rust. Of iron. Like under Gestapo boots, and indeed under all our shoes so as to save on heels and soles. With contempt in his voice he snorted: *Allzu unmannlich* lily-livered. My contempt for him was greater. I ought to confess my hatred of this fellow brother but don't want forgiveness for it. While inviting me to continue the beating, I saw Mansuetus place his hand on the taut trouser seat and explore with crimping fingers, like one does with fruit. Then a fleeting stroke of the exposed thighs, his fingers skirting the insides of the trouser legs, all this while he held out the grip to me. As if it concerned an object and not a convulsing pupil. No embarrassment towards an onlooker like me, who was feeling as humiliated as the boy, but without his physical pain. A one-hander, I thought, pleasures himself by using another of the same gender, far younger, without his consent . Sneef is bound to know about it, as well as many others who have either experienced it first hand or, like me, been forced to be present to take the pedagogical method to

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heart. This is how you keep them under control, instructed Mansuetus. The louder they scream the better they remember, Bonaventura! For blessed is the wood, whereby righteousness cometh. Apocrypha: Wisdom of Solomon, he added. Not a book I was familiar with.

My fellow brother stood behind the boy and yanked him to his feet by his collar and tightly stretched tie. Get out of my sight wretch, before I, before

I, grrr! Mansuetus shouted, his other hand wandering over thighs and trousers again, ostensibly accidentally and without purpose, nevertheless with design, despite the speed and brevity with which it happened. Even though I did not want to see it, I did see it, and I could never un-see it. Somehow or other complicit. The boy, crying loudly, leaned against the desk, where the bow lay within reach, and wiggled his legs awkwardly from side to side, trying to loosen the cutting trouser seam from his groin and tug the piece of clothing down by the short legs to its proper position. The head of school adjusted his scapular. Put out his hand to the pupil, who was supposed to place his own in it and say: Thank you for this chastisement that was administered to me fairly for the good of my education and insight. Mansuetus had decreed this rule. I suspect to appease the storms of his conscience. The boy ignored the protocol and slipped past the hulk towards the hallway door where I was standing. I stepped aside to let the fugitive past, having already opened the door a crack for him. In a blind panic, he would otherwise waste precious seconds trying to find the exact position of the handle, now he could straightaway make good his escape. We heard the sound of his shoe irons as he ran down the stone hallway. Mansuetus still with arms outstretched, hands ready to grab the boy, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his nose wrinkled up. I noticed the narrow ankles in their sandals, like a lumbering wild boar balances on tiny trotters.

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**Pages 71-78**

So there I sit, as though I don't exist, Eldert Haman. Of course I exist, for while sitting I see myself walking on through the whiteness. I came into being, come from somewhere and hold memories. These are scenes from my life:

Born in Rotterdam. Thirteen when the bombs fell. I once had a mother. She had died the year before. Buried at Crooswijk. She was German, so I was brought up partly in German, but I can pronounce Scheveningen in Dutch. Father, a dock worker, was taken from our house one evening – *Aufmachen! Abfahren!* – and disappeared. Never seen again. I was brought up by Uncle Barend and Auntie Suzan, my father's sister. Their house smelled of paint and you always heard the sea. I knew the names of all the fishing boats. Went to Teacher Training College. Obtained my German certificates. Did a lot of cycling. Me as Louison Bobet, nickname Zonzon. As Fausto Coppi, Gino Bartali, the pious one, the monk, Wout Wagtmans, Wim van Est. All over Germany. My mother's parents still live there. France. Greece. Me on my Orbea Opal 20 speed. The way the world flashed past just beyond the corner of my eye. Now I'm sitting here, sweltering in a woollen cassock that weighs my body down like a harness, not of wool but bronze, staring at my feet, having lost the pedals.

In the newspaper there was a vacancy for a German teacher, at the boys boarding school Sint Jozef ter Engelen in Blijderhagen, in deepest Limburg on the border with Germany. I got the job. Single and Catholic enough. Back then the asthmatic Hyacinthus, who administered oxygen to himself by means of a rubber squeeze-ball, was head of school. Now he is sacristan. Fusses and fumbles with the altar boys in the sacristy, smooths their hair

down with his spit and strokes their cheeks. Before they approach the altar in soutane and surplice, he frisks the boys lightly over their bodies, front and back, a final wardrobe check. Rounds it off with a little slap on the bum, or a teeny pinch.

When I was taken on as a teacher, they offered me - a civilian among all those men of the cloth, far from home and without lodgings - bed and board within the monastery while retaining my independence. I slept and took my meals in the guest quarters and was given the key to the small gate at the bottom of the garden. When lessons finished I would cycle out of the gate, returning through the same gate of an evening. What would I have been, early twenties. New-born chick among the foxes. The only things they asked me for were my ration cards for sugar, coffee, textiles and suchlike, scarce after the war. I enjoyed the teaching and did it with enthusiasm, it was all very harmonious, I was scarcely older than the eldest pupils. Although a novice in the profession, I felt I was a good teacher, and improving all the time. Calm, patient. Third case masculine *dem*. Feminine *der*. Neuter *dem*. *An auf hinter in neben uber unter vor zwischen*. German remained on the timetable, even though there was talk of instruction in the language of the Occupier being dispensed with.

And subsequently?

Everything after this in fact took place only yesterday and has yet to sink in. But it won't. What have you done Eldert Haman. My God what have I done, how have I managed to manoeuvre my life and myself down such a blind alley.

One Sunday afternoon while the boys were out hiking in the gentle hills of Limburg, supervised by a cordon of brothers, I imagined them with

holstered pistols beneath their habits, Benedictus came over and sat next to me on the bench in the garden where I had settled myself with a novel.

*Conserve*, by a new writer, a certain W.F.Hermans. What's that you're

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reading, Mr. Haman? He had come to tell me something. Must ask me something first. Are you attached Mr. Haman, I mean a lady with whom you are engaged or something? No, I said. Well, I mean are you planning to in future? No idea, I said, who knows. I mean, well, you do go off on your bicycle a great deal. I didn't respond to this. Benedictus snaked his way to the point. Surely I could not have failed to notice the preparations the piles of bricks the cement mixer etcetera. As you know we have some rebuilding work planned we now have permission to go ahead our brother Sixtus will be supervising the project. I mean our guest quarters as well the left side of the sitting room is going to be extended a bit and the back is going to be changed too and it's all going to take a while so that hence my question. I had closed Hermans, my finger marking the page. I'll have to move out, I concluded. Well, I mean, Benedictus said. His hair was a good deal less grey back then, although up on top the shiny reality could already be glimpsed. I shall have to try and find somewhere else to stay in the vicinity, I said. Brother prior worked the knotted rope through his palm, his fingers closing over each knot as if he was bunching his fist three times. Poverty, Obedience, Chastity. Well, I mean we don't want to drive you away Mr. Haman on the contrary rest assured you can remain with us. Would you have any objection to taking your meals with us brothers in the refectory while the building work is in progress we would make an exception merely bend the monastery rules a little instead of our brother Severinus serving you your meals in the guestroom which is being rebuilt

as we said. You are not always present there every day anyway that's why I asked the question please don't be offended out on your bicycle. Hermans slipped from my fingers and landed on the bench. The things you read. I sometimes enjoy an Indonesian meal in Rodekerken, I said. Of course I

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would have no objection to taking my meals with you all. Benedictus interrupted me with a question: Is it tasty food? I took it he meant the exotic *nasi rames* and not the mashed potato and vegetable sludge studded with lardons Severinus served up most days. But where to find a bed, I continued. That's what we mean, Benedictus said and stopped clenching the knots. If you don't object you could sleep in our monastery as well. Your own room you can withdraw to in comfort with your textbooks simple of course but all to yourself congenial. Can come and go as you want quietly of course at night because the brothers sleep on the same wing early to bed and up with the lark. So that. I mean. No need for rushing off this minute finding other lodgings beyond the walls and you stay living near and working where you were before. Brother superior concluded with: Suggestion. Worth considering perhaps Mr. Haman.

The knots in the brother-cord form a small coil, rather like the larger version found in the noose of the rope which is tightened beneath the chin of someone sentenced to be hanged, just before the trapdoor under his feet opens up. It was sometime before I managed to wind the cord in such a way as to fashion a handgrip-knot. Once I had mastered it, nowadays I can do it blind, I did wonder just what I had been spending my time on, my time, correction, it was not my time any more, monks do not have any time of their own, something they share with lifers. As if I was knotting a noose for myself.

Which reminded me of that day, more than six years ago, 1946: Uncle Barend and I sitting by the radio that he had managed to conceal under the floor of his paint shop all through the war. Autumn, the sea was restless. On the hour in Nuremburg, where the trials had taken place, one of the

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bastards from the war was sent to the gallows, each hanging being broadcast to the entire world by wireless. A name would be heard: Wilhelm Keitel. The sound of Keitel's tread. Up the steps to the scaffold. Silence. The noose was passed over Wilhelm Keitel's head. *Heil Hitler!* he shouted. The floor beneath his feet collapsed, one heard the snag of the rope with its noose. Silence. During which uncle Barend said: Ta-dah, there he goes! After a quarter of an hour or more the voice of a doctor confirming the death. Then all sorts of sounds and rummaging about, followed by silence once again, until the next name was called and it was all repeated. Joachim von Ribbentrop. Ernst Kaltenbrunner. Arthur Seyss-Inquart. Hey, there he is, said Uncle Barend, did you hear Suzan? Julius Streicher. Alfred Jodl. Each time it happened, the snag of the rope, I felt it in my scrotum. Yes, I heard, said Auntie Suzan, but it won't bring our Eldert back. She was referring to her brother, my father. Wonder if he is still alive. I could hang myself with my white cord now that I have learned how to tie a noose.

Brother Benedictus fondled the knots in his cord while he buttered me up. Wouldn't it, would be a solution for you wouldn't it. And I, clod, childishly naïve, only just potty-trained, moved my case of clothes and my case of books from the guest quarters near the main entrance, to a small room in the monastery building. Room with a window. View of the garden and the vegetable patches. Walled. The wall does not enclose the monastery, but

the outside world with its streetcar named desire, the Vesuvius of mining waste and the tower with its wheel, lit up at night. How kind of the men to let you live there, wrote Auntie Suzan. I still had my bicycle. Evenings and free Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, as well as Sundays, were spent cycling about the surrounding area, South Limburg, Germany. Often went to the cinema, but the monastery authorities preferred me not to talk about

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it in class, and absolutely not to the brothers at meals times or in the recreation room. That I had seen Vivien Leigh and Doris Day, Anne Baxter, Debbie Reynolds, Deanna Durbin. All those names of beautiful women, I project them onto the white-washed walls surrounding me, together with their faces and figures in those full-skirted pleated dresses and swimming costumes, the latest model is apparently called a bikini. Get thee behind me Satan. Although. On second thoughts, stay with me too. They are mine, all these women, they appear to me in the part of my memory which is still inhabited.

At night, when I got back, I would take off my shoes at the beginning of the hall so as not to disturb the sleepers. Sometimes there would be a letter waiting for me in my room, usually from Auntie Susan. Someone would leave it on the writing desk with its drawers and compartments where I prepared my lessons, corrected homework, wrote letters. My door did have a lock, I could feel the key with which I always locked it in my windcheater. So there had to be someone else within the monastery itself who had a key to my room and used it to enter my tiny abode when I was in the school building teaching lessons, or peddling around outside the walls. A novel lying open on the wooden floor next to my bed had been moved slightly,

thumbed through and left at a different passage to where I had stopped. I noticed someone had rummaged through my clothes. There was the morning I grasped thin air when reaching for my shaving brush with the ivory handle. Together with the silver Gillette razor one of the personal things left behind by my father. Turned out it had been moved, not by me, from the right of the sink up onto the glass shelf above. One day the postcard that had leaned against the inkpot disappeared, Marlene Dietrich in top hat and tails sitting on a beer barrel, one knee drawn up and clasped by her hands, naked thighs above the black suspenders. Another day the

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envelope containing a letter for me lay opened on the green felt of the writing desk. Auntie Suzan. Uncle Barend's eyes were now so poor that he had upset a tin of varnish from his workbench all over his best trousers. To be honest Uncle Barend is in a bit of a bad way altogether. And how are you getting on my boy, and when are we going to see you again. Well, cheerio for now and a big kiss. I questioned brother Domitianus about it, three times a day he collected the packs of letters, and anything else we had been sent, from the postman at the main gate. All the post goes directly to brother superior, said Domitianus. And so I discovered that all outgoing and ingoing post was opened and read in his office. By Benedictus himself, but more often by his parasite wasp Amadeo, who knows everything and remembers it too. The key to my room lay next to his letter opener that resembles a Javanese dagger, in the pen tray on his blackened inky blotter. Letter opened absentmindedly, my apologies, Mr. Haman. Next my bicycle. I would be allowed to keep it under the lean-to, by the rear gate. I took great care of my cycle, constantly checking over each part, oiling, polishing, cossetting. I even talked to my velocipede. Thank you for letting me ride

you. Suddenly - everything always happened suddenly - my Orbea Opal, my swift beloved, began to suffer all sorts of ailments. The pedals rotated madly, one even breaking off just like that. Then I found the chain lying in the sand like a dead reptile. Discovered a vicious nail sticking out of the front tyre. I always locked it and the lock's workings had been tampered with, twisted. In a monastery with its own brother baker, brother butcher, brother accountant, brother cook, , carpenter, plumber, printer, tailor, shoemaker, agricultural worker, barber, there was no brother cycle repairer to be found. Brother odd-job man took a look at my 20-Speed,

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shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Didn't know the first thing about it. Spat out a brown stream meant for the ground but which splattered my beloved's spokes instead. On foot to the village. No bicycle repairer. Though there was a make-up artist for the miners' dramatic society.

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