

IN THE LION'S DEN

by Miks Koljers

Possessing the face of an inflated bullfrog and a personal scent equally redolent of the swamp had not held back Pastor Juris Smits. As the enamelled cross pinned to his lapel testified, he was a man of high standing in moral circles. His holy heart swelled with pride every time he was addressed as 'Pastor', a title he had awarded himself a decade previously in lieu of any formal theological qualification and which by God-given luck had stuck. No-one even questioned its origin any more.

A cynic or, worse still, an atheist intellectual liberal homosexual might sneer that 'Pastor' meant no more than 'Counsellor' or 'Therapist' - words with a whiff of rigour and qualification but no actual taste, nothing to get one's teeth into. Words that suggest somewhere a certificate hangs on a wall, but do nothing to verify whether it was issued by a reputable body. Words to make his simple flock, in their occasional moments of doubt and independent thought, begin a sentence with: "Perhaps I do not agree with him but he *is* a Pastor..."

Smits had no such certificate, though he did have plenty of other pieces of paper bearing signatures, stamps and seals adorning his walls. They came from the Society Of Christian Truth and the Keepers of Christ's Values (Limited), which was legally obliged to register as a company given the fact it generated a considerable annual profit for its directors even though its works were clearly for the moral good of a decadent public.

The most colourful banner of merit however came from the Brotherhood Against Pederasty, a particularly outspoken selection of stout-hearted brothers (and sisters) who donated hundreds of man hours to chronicling in eye-watering detail the disgusting acts and influence of homosexuals and their familiars by means of hidden microphones, cameras and what they liked to call the "confessions" of repentant homos.

Considering the deep disgust members of the Brotherhood expressed upon encountering anything even vaguely gay, such as the lighter shades of the colour purple, their dedication in exposing and recounting a catalogue of kisses, fumbblings and creative genital manipulations bore powerful testimony to the strength of their Bible-backed morality. Daniel spent just a single night in the lion's den whereas these brave souls returned to their den of iniquity time after time, unperturbed by the sight of lions rutting energetically in a manner wholly forbidden by God's law.

Given their frequent inability to articulate anything other than a succession of low moans and groans of nausea, it fell quite naturally to Pastor Smits to act as their collective mouthpiece. Though breadth of vocabulary may not have been his, length certainly was. He could rail endlessly against Sodom and should it be necessary, Gomorrah too, recalling Biblical stories at will to reinforce his arguments. Those stories had been drilled into him by his equally fervent father, not always in strict accordance with the holy text, but with no

lack of memorable imagery and moral imperative. It made Smits if not the most articulate then certainly the most voluble voice of what he liked to call 'Xtian' decency in the whole country.

On this particular Thursday Pastor Smits was in a wonderful mood. It was early summer. Birds sang, clouds in the shapes of pure white seraphim fluttered overhead and all was good in His creation. Pastor Smits clutched a large bouquet of orange and pink flowers and walked along the cobbled streets as if stepping along a line of tiny trampolines. Beneath his shirt the rolls of fat around his waist bounced up and down wholesomely, for he always obeyed the Bible's instruction to eat three good square meals a day.

Having served as a member of parliament for several years, representing several different parties according to which was most interested in securing the guaranteed moral votes he represented, he retained the right of permanent access to the parliament building and the library secreted within it. Pastor Smits was its most loyal customer, taking full advantage of his privilege to visit every Thursday. His primary aim was not, as many suspected, to 'accidentally' meet with serving MPs in the corridor and press on them the urgency of restoring good Xtian values to society, but was in fact to peruse the local and national press. The library had subscriptions to every publication in the country. Usefully, his parliamentary pass also allowed him to make use of the library's photocopying machine, free of charge.

He nodded to the security guards at the entrance to the parliament building, gratified that they did not ask to see his identification. His face was easily remembered. He padded along the corridor, down a flight of steps into a rather dingy marble foyer, past the grand staircase to the main debating chamber, and then up a small flight of steps on the other side. He breezed into the library, which consisted of two rooms, first a reading room with a single, huge oval table surrounded by empty chairs, with display cabinets and newspaper racks along the walls, and then the inner sanctum, the place where all the paperwork of the parliament, all the back issues of the newspapers and magazines - and the photocopiers - were kept in good order by a small team of female librarians.

As he entered, Pastor Smits just caught sight of several of the librarians scuttling away behind the shelves and filing cabinets to mysterious ante-rooms into which he had never ventured. They disappeared like startled mice into their nests, which struck Pastor Smits as very unfortunate timing, because he had come specifically – or at least semi-specifically – to present them with the bouquet which even now emanated a strong, sweet perfume as if to shield itself from the bullfrog stink of which he was mercifully unaware.

Pastor Smits thought he could hear angry whispering somewhere behind the folders and files, words that could almost have been: "You... no you... I did last time... person in the world... owe me... very well!"

A shelf full of regional newspapers slid forward on its rollers, like the stone rolling away

from the Tomb and out stepped not the Saviour of Mankind but Miss Parsla, one of the senior librarians.

“Good morning Mr Smits...”

“Pastor Smits,” he interrupted, his amphibian features falling into the sort of grotesque parody of a smile that is a feature of all bullfrogs.

“What can I do for you? The usual?”

“What do you mean Miss Parsla?”

“What you usually do Mister Smits...”

“Pastor Smits.”

“...by which I mean would you like to look through the gossip and entertainment magazines of the past seven days, photocopy them and then take the copies away with you?”

“Well, I may avail myself of your facilities a little later to be sure,” said Pastor Smits, the ends of his smile now almost touching at the back of his head, “But the real reason I came was to hand these to you and your colleagues!”

His mouth dropped open in rapturous delight. Miss Parsla's mouth opened too, probably from the same emotion. Miss Parsla could sometimes be a little brusque, as she had been this morning, Pastor Smits thought. But her clear amazement at the gift of flowers reassured him that she was after all a woman. For a while he had harboured suspicions that she might be a lesbian. Looking at her now, as she flushed a comely red and placed her hands on the side of her face, made it clear that she was not, for no lesbian could possibly react to flowers in so feminine a manner.

“Looking at the calendar this morning, I noticed that today it is exactly five years since I started coming here to the library every Thursday! Can you believe it? It seems only yesterday!”

“Five years?” said Miss Parsla.

“Yes, five years,” said Pastor Smits, handing over the bouquet rather clumsily. He was always clumsy around women and the appearance of the other librarians from the papered recesses gave the room a decidedly feminine feel.

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering! Hebrews 10:23,” he added. A quotation from the good book eased every social interaction with which Pastor Smits

was involved.

“That's very... thoughtful of you,” said Miss Parsla, who was definitely not a lesbian. “Will there be anything else?”

“Well, as I am here, perhaps I could look through a few of the publications you keep. It allows me to give more of my personal funds to the church you see...”

“Private Life, Who Did What and Celebrity Faces?”

“Yes, that would be good to start with, thank you, Miss Parsla.” She retreated out of range of Pastor Smits' smile in order to seek the magazines he desired.

Minutes later, the photocopier was chugging away like a train with a good head of steam up. As Pastor Smits shovelled in smut at one end, the machine spewed out copies at the other, sadly still only in black and white, though he had written to the Parliamentary Chancellery suggesting the purchase of a modern colour photocopying machine some time ago.

Within half an hour he had amassed quite a pile of cuttings, each another indictment of the sad state to which society had degenerated as a result of its Godless path. Within the first three celebrity magazines he had uncovered seven clearly visible nipples, six partially visible nipples, one male member with outline clearly visible, two lascivious group poses (heterosexual) and one group pose (homosexual) featuring a fashion designer and a popular actor pouting at each other.

Whether they had actually kissed remained thankfully unconfirmed in the accompanying text, which was written as if such deviant behaviour was perfectly normal at fashion shows. This was one for the special folder Pastor Smits kept labelled “encouragement of gay lifestyle”.

Long hair on men and trousers on women were bad enough, but mere symptoms of the root cause: homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, sex changes and all related phenomena including acting in a camp manner, drug abuse and paedophilia. Unlike most of his flock, Pastor Smits was actually aware of the distinction between pederasty and paedophilia – he had looked both words up in a reputable non-modern dictionary several times in order to be clear on the subject.

His capacious satchel now positively engorged with the dregs of modern decadence, Pastor Smits gave one last, radiant smile to the librarians who had emerged from hibernation and were busy at their tasks.

He was a little concerned to see that his flowers were not yet on display, but consoled himself that probably the poor lambs were unused to such acts of kindness and were likely

having trouble locating a suitable vase for the blooms. He had acquired them for a particularly good price at the florists' kiosk owing to the fact that they were labelled as yesterday's flowers. They still looked perfectly acceptable so Pastor Smits bought them, despite their almost-homosexual coloration, and made a mental note to donate the difference between the actual price and the price he had expected to pay to his church. Pastor Smits made many such mental notes.

His gait as he left the rear library room was only slightly less spring-heeled than it had been when he entered, as a result of the considerable weight of his bag. Walking through the reading room he saw that one of the chairs around the huge oval reading table was now occupied by a slightly seedy looking middle-aged man he had never seen before.

He appeared to be reading a copy of the *Financial Times*, but was holding it up in front of him in rather too obvious a fashion, the way incompetent gunmen do in old films when they are trailing the hero. Sure enough, the paper lowered a couple of inches and the man's foreign-looking brown eyes peered over the top at Pastor Smits with one eyebrow cocked in what looked very much like an expression of ironic amusement.

He looked like a nasty piece of work, his brown corduroy suit all ruffled, his tie crooked below an unbuttoned collar and, as he lay the newspaper down, a definite smirk upon his sardonic face. The pink pages of the newspaper seemed to communicate to Pastor Smits that the man was very probably a homosexual. As a dog smells fear, homosexuals could sense the righteousness of Pastor Smits, and it made them vicious and bold.

Pastor Smits' face betrayed his distaste at being in the same room as someone he was now absolutely sure had committed at least seven of the twelve groups of unspeakable sexual acts to which Pastor Smits had so far discovered these creatures abandoned their carnal appetites.

Then, as he was stepping over the threshold of the reading room, behind him the seedy man's voice said a single word which sounded very much like "Smut!"

He turned and looked at the man.

"My name is Smits!" he said with immense dignity.

"Yes, I know," said the seedy man in corduroy – a fabric popular with one of the worst kinds of homosexual – "I was just sneezing. Excuse me." He had a decided foreign accent, which further increased the chances that he was a practitioner of Satan's Sex.

There followed an uneasy silence during which the man wiped his nose with a none-too-clean handkerchief, all the time maintaining his sarcastic expression.

Pastor Smits was a busy man. He left, wondering how many other homosexuals had access

to parliament.

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Precisely one week later, Pastor Smits returned, this time without flowers. He had considered taking more – for what could be a more unexpected delight for Miss Parsla and her colleagues than more flowers – particularly as he was expecting a rather extensive workload on this visit given the numerous celebrity parties and raunchy stage shows he had heard about during the previous seven days. But asceticism had won out and he made a mental note to make a small donation to the church in lieu of more blooms.

To his consternation, the man in brown corduroy – brown, he noted, being a colour favoured by a particular type of pederast - was sitting in the reading room as he passed through on his way to the photocopying room. This suspicious individual even had the temerity to give him a little nod and again mispronounced his name as “Smut” by way of greeting.

Pastor Smits put his nose in the air and passed majestically into the other room, catching Miss Parsla completely by surprise.

“Hello, hello, hello!” he said like an unseasonal St Nicholas, turning his head to spray his greeting to all corners of the library, though the mice appeared to have scattered again.

“On your own today, Miss Parsla?”

“No, Mr Smits, my colleagues are here somewhere...”

“Pastor Smits.”

“...but they appear to have been called away unexpectedly.”

“Ah, the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Romans 8:18. May I begin today with an examination of *True Secrets*? I would never usually ask to read such a low-grade journal, but a member of my church informed me it contains a particularly disgraceful confession about marital infidelity, accompanied by visible aureolae... excuse my language please Miss Parsla.”

“Would it not have been easier if your friend had let you read her copy?”

“How did you know it was a female, Miss Parsla?”

"*True Secrets* is read mainly by women." Miss Parsla almost added "and gay men" but did not yield to temptation.

"Ah, I see... yes, well, I'm sure the member of my flock had not bought a copy. Naturally none of my flock would wish to subsidise such a rag. But she had been told this scandalous screed existed and very conscientiously informed me..."

"Ah, I see... yes, well... you have no objection to the parliamentary library subsidising *True Secrets* with a subscription?"

"It would be better that such publications did not exist, but if they do it is safest that they are kept under lock and key in parliament." Pastor Smits was very pleased with his reply.

While Miss Parsla disappeared in search of depravity, Pastor Smits laid his empty bag onto a chair and looked around. He was disappointed that his flowers were not on display, but perhaps the fact he had bought them at a very good price because they were already past their best meant that they had not lasted as long as completely fresh flowers might have.

But he also saw, through the open door to the reading room, the suspicious man in the brown corduroy suit. The man was clearly watching him, and only when Pastor Smits returned his insolent gaze did he pick up his foreign newspaper and start reading it. There mere sight of the pink pages of Mammon sent a shiver down Pastor Smits' moral backbone.

Miss Parsla returned and as she handed him the magazine – the cover made no secret of the depravity to be found within – he leaned forward conspiratorially, though the gesture was not effective as Miss Parsla immediately recoiled.

"My apologies for the sudden movement, Miss Parsla, but... do you know who that man is?" whispered Pastor Smits.

"What man?"

"That man in the reading room? In the brown corduroy suit?" he said the words "brown corduroy suit" as if they were irrefutable evidence of the basest forms of bestiality.

"I think he's one of the foreign correspondents. One of the girls told me his name is Beacon, but I have never really spoken to him except to say hello. He often comes in here to read the newspapers. I think he may be American. He never causes any trouble, never asks for anything. He is very polite."

"Hmm, yes, they often are... on the outside," said Pastor Smits.

"Americans?"

"No. Pederasts."

"Do you want this magazine or not?" Miss Parsla asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"The photocopier is ready. We thought you would be coming so we filled it up with paper."

"Thank you Miss Parsla! Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God! Matthew 5:8."

But Miss Parsla had gone before he had even completed his benediction, leaving Pastor Smits alone to study and then Xerox the distressing tale of a married woman who discovered she was bisexual and then got her upstanding husband involved, corrupting him to such a degree that he boasted of how much he enjoyed being in bed with more than one woman. It merited closer inspection at home and probable inclusion in the 'Encouragement of Gay Lifestyle' folder.

By the time Pastor Smits had finished his arduous shift at the photocopier, it was giving off an almost nuclear heat. Yet throughout, he had the unmistakable sensation that he was being watched, not by the librarians, who would occasionally try to peep at his discoveries – he was careful to protect their eyes lest they be shocked, knowing how famously delicate librarians are – but by the foreign correspondent in the reading room. Every time Pastor Smits glanced in his direction, the correspondent seemed to be returning his attention with the familiar sardonic curl to his small lips.

It really had been a filthy week. One needed to bear witness to such outrage, no matter what the personal cost, even if it meant sitting up all night in pyjamas, poring over every sordid nuance. Tomorrow, Pastor Smits would be exhausted, his eyes red-rimmed, his body somehow dessicated despite his generous proportions, as if all the fluid had been sucked out of him. But he would endure. Week after week, year after year, the campaign would continue until final victory was achieved and heavy penalties were imposed in this very parliament for committing any of the dozen unspeakable acts he had recorded in forensic detail, with particularly harsh punishment for numbers eleven and twelve.

Bristling with holy anticipation, he cast his smile once again around the shelves, the cabinets and racks, catching a few timid little eyes peering back at him, and retraced his steps through the reading room.

The pervert in brown corduroy named Beacon was still there, boldly reading the pink pages of his foreign newspaper. Pastor Smits had intended to pass by without comment

but when he saw what the man was actually reading, he was halted in his tracks. There, in the middle of what he had assumed to be a broadsheet financial newspaper produced for the benefit of the great Liberal-Jewish conspiracy, upside-down from the vantage point at which Pastor Smits viewed it, was a half-page colour picture of nauseating luridness that shocked even his experienced gaze.

It was of a man in middle age, bare-chested, strutting through a forest with a large and quite obviously phallic dagger strapped to his side. It was one of the most cravenly homosexual images Pastor Smits had ever encountered, even without the most shocking thing: the gay hero wore a silver crucifix around his neck. It dangled there on his hairless chest, in open mockery of everything Pastor Smits held dearest. It was more than he could bear.

“What in the Lord's name are you reading, Sir?” he demanded of Beacon. “This is the parliament of a noble and clean-living nation and you sit there reading filth!”

Beacon actually burst out laughing, such was his lack of shame.

“I know the *Financial Times* isn't quite what it used to be but that's a bit harsh, isn't it?” he said.

“And what is THAT?” demanded Pastor Smits, extending his arm and finger in a manner that would have done any Old Testament prophet proud, pointing at the picture of the middle aged pederast.

“The President of the Russian Federation, I believe,” said the man in brown corduroy. He swivelled the newspaper round through 180 degrees so that Pastor Smits could verify the fact for himself. It was indeed the President of Russia.

“You know how he likes to pose for these outdoorsy shots,” Beacon said.

“I find it highly questionable and highly immodest,” said Pastor Smits.

“I agree entirely,” said Beacon. “Say, aren't you the chap who hates gays?”

“I hate no-one,” said Pastor Smits. “Christians are obliged to love all of their fellow men... even if they disobey God's laws.”

“So it would be okay for me to write that you love gays?”

“Certainly not!” cried Pastor Smits. “One does not love a disease – but one can love the body which carries it.”

“So you believe homosexuality is a disease?”

“It can be cured, science has proven that, which means it must be a disease. A disease of the soul, one might say. May I ask why you are questioning me in this manner? And why would you need to write anything concerning me?”

“Well, I am a reporter,” Beacon said. “Beacon's the name. I'm writing a feature about this Megapride event that will be happening next week,” - Pastor Smits steadied himself by clutching the back of the nearest chair at mention of the word 'Megapride' - “I was looking for someone to represent the people who are against it. Would you be available for an interview before it takes place?”

Pastor Smits' mind did not race, for it was incapable of doing so, but a few more synapses were involved in his thought processes than usual. Publicity was important, not only for attracting funding but in order to ensure a prominent position at the demonstration against Megapride, which would be the largest gay parade in Europe of the year.

While there was no shortage of opposition to Megapride among right-thinking people, there was always a good deal of jostling for position in order to be at the head of the counter-demonstration. Many of the opponents of homosexuality were pure of soul but inarticulate. Pastor Smits traditionally spoke for them but in recent years he had been plagued by the rise of other high-profile defenders of family values, most notably a Russian evangelical preacher by the name of Anton Lebed whom Pastor Smits regarded with fear and suspicion.

At the last rally they had attended together they had been reduced to stealing the megaphone from each other at two minute intervals, each trying to outdo the invective of the other, each understanding the other but each speaking a completely different language with Smits railing in Latvian and Lebed rabble-rousing in Russian. Each intervention would end in a collective chant that the other speaker would then have to overcome before launching his own chant in a different tongue. The net result was confusing for all concerned and lacked the hoped-for impact with many of the parade of perverts simply cupping their hands and saying “We can't understand what you are saying” instead of having their souls flayed.

Luckily, some among Pastor Smits flock had thought ahead and brought a supply of rotten eggs to throw at the apostates instead, though unfortunately the gays proved themselves to be accomplished athletes, catching many of the eggs before they landed and hurling them back into the ranks of the righteous where they exploded with sulphurous effectiveness.

“I suppose I could speak to you,” said Pastor Smits, “but I must ask you a question.”

“Fire away.”

“Are you yourself of the... homosexual persuasion?”

“No.”

“Very well. Shall we say, here, at...”

“...the same time next week?” completed Beacon.

“How did you know I would suggest that?” asked Pastor Smits, suspecting some devilish trick.

“Oh, a lucky guess. I'm often here at this time on a Thursday and I've noticed you are too. T the photocopier over there.”

“Yes, well, regular habits are clean habits,” Pastor Smits countered. “With the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. Romans 10:9-10.”

“Very well put,” said Beacon.

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And so it came to pass that a week later, God having decided not to destroy the sinful cosmos for in the interim, the liaison between Pastor Smits and Beacon began. Their first small-talk in the library, clumsily exchanged like teenagers on a blind date, quickly attracted a “Shhh!” from Miss Parsla and her Sisters of Mercy, so the rendezvous location was switched to a French patisserie nearby frequently used by Beacon as a sort of unofficial office.

Part of the reason Beacon liked to take interviewees there was to see what they would choose when he offered them a free go at the cake counter. He had discovered there are few more accurate indicators of an individual's essential character than their choice of cake. The unexpected selection of a *tarte tatin* had on one occasion forced him to completely revise his opinion of a member of parliament renowned as a boor and philistine. Similarly, when the Culture Minister ordered the entirely obvious *pain au chocolat*, Beacon predicted – correctly as it turned out – that it would be a thin year for the arts.

He had Pastor Smits down as a definite sweet tooth. Something along the lines of a Napoleon torte or a runny *eclair* was his prediction, but this proved wide of the mark. After stroking both of his chins for twenty seconds and muttering as if possessed by puff pastry demons, Pastor Smits extended his prophetic forearm once again to indicate his choice: a fruit tart of baroque construction around which variegated berries dangled, rolled and sparkled among a thin filigree of sugar and petrified caramel atop a base of solid yet seductive Belgian chocolate biscuit. It was an extremely gay creation, in every

sense of the word.

Beacon ordered his usual - Esterhazy torte – and as the cakes landed in front of them, the interview began. Pastor Smits gave an account of his background. It was much as Beacon might have guessed: a domineering father whom he worshipped, a relationship of unusual intimacy with the mother, an elder brother who teased him for being fat and no good at sports and over whom Pastor Smits now felt himself to be vastly superior. At school he was regarded as having a good memory for facts and being unusually diligent in completing his work but was also felt to be unimaginative and was not popular with his peers.

All of this came not from Pastor Smits' own lips exactly but in the hints and omissions that his words signified. According to his account, his path had been pre-ordained, as if the whole world had been moved from side to side by his personal sponsor, God, merely in order to ensure that Pastor Smits ended up right where he was now: sitting in a patisserie with Beacon nibbling at the edges of an opulent tart and wondering when to move in for the kill on the juicy, bulbous cloudberry sparkling at its centre.

Talking to Pastor Smits was not easy. Like most people with plenty to say, he was a bore. This was perhaps partly due to the fact that it was a first meeting but, Beacon could not help but feel, more likely due to the fact he simply was extraordinarily dull. His one colourful trait - religious mania mixed with a strange homosexual fascination – was hardly the sort of thing usually discussed over coffee and cake. Without that particular gay gong to bash, everything else he said might have been lifted from a phrasebook designed to give an introduction to polite conversation.

Having let him blow himself to a standstill. Beacon was about to go on the offensive with a blunt question along the lines of “Why are you so interested in homosexuality?” when a curious thing happened. Pastor Smits had been eyeing the door for some time as he outlined his unextraordinary biography and reacted with instant surprise when someone he recognised walked in through the door of the cafe.

“Solvita!” he erupted. “My goodness me, what are you doing here? Mr Beacon, let me introduce my very good friend Solvita. Solvita is one of the Brothers Against Pederasty. You could say she is the leading Sister among the Brothers!”

Solvita, a middle-aged woman of neat but unremarkable appearance in black coat and gloves, gave a little curtsey to Beacon and sat down at the table without being invited to do so. She was a much worse actor than Pastor Smits.

“Can I offer you something to eat?” Beacon asked, “a pastry, a piece of quiche perhaps?”

“Is it all foreign food?” Solvita scowled.

"Most of it," Beacon admitted. "There is onion soup – that's fairly international."

"Does it have meat in it?"

"I don't think so."

"Then no, I won't have anything," Solvita said. It was curious indeed that she had entered the French cafe when she had such a bias against foreign food without meat in it, but neither Solvita nor Pastor Smits seemed to realise this, so confident were they that their subterfuge had worked according to plan.

"It must be hard work going through all those videos of people doing... those things?" Beacon asked speculatively.

"Tell him, my dear," Pastor Smits said, placing a brotherly hand on her shoulder.

"You would not believe how low humans can sink! Animals!" Solvita spat. "Pastor Smits has educated us in the twelve sins of which homosexuals are capable and over three years I have witnessed nine of them myself! I have no desire to see the other three, but if I have to in order to shine light into the darkest corners, I will make the sacrifice!" Solvita said in manner of speech certainly not her own, like a schoolgirl reciting a multiplication table.

"What exactly are these twelve 'sins' as you call them?" Beacon asked.

Before he could reply, Pastor Smits squeezed more firmly on her shoulder, as if working a ventriloquist's dummy.

"I have a factsheet prepared on that subject," he said, "but it is highly explicit in nature." Reaching into his bag he pulled out a file marked "The twelve sins of Satan", looked furtively around the room to make sure no persons of a nervous sexual disposition were looking and pushed a colour brochure across the table to Beacon.

"Please do not look at it here. A child could enter at any moment!" Pastor Smits wailed.

"Disgusting!" agreed Solvita.

Beacon nodded slowly and placed the brochure of Beelzebub in his pocket.

"What do you think of Megapride?" Beacon asked.

"Disgusting!" said Solvita, a model of consistency. "I don't see what they have to be proud of! I should be called Mega-shame!" she added, as if it was a particularly original thought.

At least it was a useable quote, Beacon told himself, the sort of thing that would appeal to

his editors. They were suckers for epigrammatic wit, no matter how cretinous, and always found it immensely reassuring when members of the public spoke in clichés.

Solvita carried on in a similar vein for a while, none of her words reaching quite the same heights of journalistic convenience as she chugged out a litany of repetitious hatred.

Meanwhile, Beacon's chief fascination lay in watching Pastor Smits' reptilian approach to eating his cake. He eyed it hungrily, his slightly protruding eyes taking on a chameleon quality as they swivelled from one berry to the next. His tongue, dripping drool, licked at his dry lips as if it might dart out at any moment and whip the entire confection back into his throat.

In another telling sign of the inner man he picked up a spoon in preference to a pastry fork. Clearly he was attempting to eat the cake in a decorous manner but his clumsiness meant he only succeeded in reducing the elegant product of the patissier's art into a colourful fruit salad, slightly squashed, so that he could finally shovel it with cocked elbow into his gaping jowls. It was a curiously compelling sight, reminiscent of feeding time in the crocodile pen.

"...which is why unless this sort of thing is stamped out, there will be no country left to save!" concluded Solvita.

Resuscitating his interest with some effort, Beacon asked: "What do you mean?"

"If everyone is turned gay, where will the children come from?"

Phenomena such as test tube babies and artificial insemination had clearly yet to reveal themselves to Solvita. Beacon decided not to spoil the surprise.

"Thank the Lord for Pastor Smits!" said Solvita.

"You are too kind," murmured the blushing Pastor.

"Yes, he and Holy Anton Lebed are the only voices speaking out against this culture of sin!" Solvita added, at which point Pastor Smits' blush changed its colour a little.

"Lebed? Have you been seeing him?" he demanded, quickly altering his tone to add "While I thank the Lord for sending him to swell our ranks, and his heart is in the right place, he can sometimes get a little carried away..."

"We need all the help we can get. Holy Anton is not a gentleman of the cloth like yourself, Pastor, but he does get things done – one way or another."

"What did you call him?"

"Who?"

"Lebed. You said 'Holy' Anton."

"Yes, he said we should call him that."

"Ridiculous!" spluttered Pastor Smits. "Mister Lebed is very good at attracting attention of a certain sort, I grant you, and that is very welcome... but it is we who are sitting here speaking to the famous international correspondent Mr Beacon, Solvita, not Lebed."

Solvita looked at Beacon as if trying to determine whether he really was as important as Pastor Smits said.

"I suppose so," she shrugged.

"Mr Beacon, it has been a pleasure. Will you join us tomorrow in our march against Megapride? I think you will find there is more pride on our side than on theirs!" he chuckled.

"I'll certainly be there somewhere."

Pastor Smits had clearly accepted that Beacon would give him a fair hearing in the feature he would write about Megapride and was fullsome in his thanks for the cake he had so comprehensively obliterated. Wrapping a scarf around his bullfrog neck and placing a peaked black cap on his head so that he looked like a grotesquely overgrown Victorian schoolboy, he paused before leaving, leaned towards Beacon and whispered seriously: "Are you absolutely sure you are not a homosexual?"

"Quite sure," Beacon replied.

Pastor Smits nodded, satisfied with the answer, then left with a little wave of his left hand.

"Solvita, will you join me? I have some new material that I think even you will find shocking. It touches upon the eleventh act..."

"Really?" said Solvita with a mixture of fear and fascination.

"It does."

The pair of them sauntered off without another word, their attention fully absorbed in the genital manipulations of others. It wasn't until they had disappeared across the featureless square outside that Beacon noticed Pastor Smits had forgotten his folder. 'The Twelve Sins of Satan' sat there on the chair in a suitably infernal red folder. For a moment he thought of

chasing after Pastor Smits and returning it but quickly concluded that it might be better after all to borrow it for a while. What riches might it contain!

He tucked it under his arm and headed off for his next appointment before Pastor Smits had a chance to return in search of his carnal catalogue.

* * * *

That appointment was at the 'EU House' an institution that theoretically existed to disseminate information about the European Union to the population of the country. However, as the population of the country was not particularly interested in finding anything out about the EU now that they were actually part of it, the EU House existed in a state of readiness for things that rarely happened, never quite sure what it was supposed to be. Its stock publications were too boring for it to be a library, its coffee machine too inadequate to be a cafe, its rooms too public to be a workspace and its main hall too small for substantial meetings.

This last fact was being proven by the organizers of Megapride, who had called a press conference to explain what their parade was all about to a local media consisting of generally sympathetic journalists reporting to generally unsympathetic editors.

It was already packed when Beacon arrived, with too few chairs for the large number of journo in attendance, at least half of them camera crews from Germany and Scandinavia preparing contrast reports to show how liberal and cosmopolitan their own countries were compared to this unreconstructed corner of unenlightened Europe.

These rapidly imported journalists were easily discernible from the locals: they had ruddy pink skin, wore sensible jackets with TV station logos and lots of pockets, and had the busy, reliable air of people who were always on time and never stuck for a question. They were almost naive in the way they went about their business, bluntly asking personal questions that would take Beacon an age to work up to. If Beacon launched into such enquiries without preliminaries, he expected to get a mouthful of abuse and a quick termination of the interview. But these Germans, Swedes and Danes weren't naïve, they were direct and utterly confident in their right to ask any question they wanted because, after all, they were journalists and that meant something.

Beacon increasingly had the feeling that he was a journalist and that meant nothing at all. It was the difference between feeling oneself to be a noble lion stalking the jungle and a parasite sucking among the rotten roots.

In front of a large screen bearing the logo of Megapride – a rainbow-coloured range target that seemed like an invitation to trouble – the two people Beacon had come to talk to were finishing their presentation, one a woman with the no-nonsense manner of a staff sergeant speaking in the local language, the other a wiry man with hooded eyes providing

translations into an American-accented English with a playful undertone reminiscent of Gore Vidal.

“From the hotel we will proceed in an orderly manner to the northern entrance of the park. This will take ten minutes. Once inside the park we shall perform a circuit clockwise, staying off the grass where possible. Counter-demonstrators will be positioned to the east and south of the park, so in those areas we recommend not venturing too close to the perimeter,” the crop-haired woman in white T-shirt explained, as if describing some complex breakout from a prisoner of war camp. The parade's route appeared on the screen behind her in animated form.

“We'll mosey on out of the hotel and take a walk in the park where we'll feed the ducks. On no account feed the other wildlife you might see around the park as they could easily choke on anything not in liquid form,” chuckled the man said in the English translation.

The presentation finished with questions from the efficient Nordic contingent.

“Are the police going to provide any protection at all?”

“As a gay in this country how afraid are you of daily violence?”

“Is it disgraceful that no government ministers will march with you?”

The woman and the man, in their own styles, gave answers that amounted to “Yes”, “Not very” and “It's their choice,” and concluded the presentation in order to launch into the dozens of individual interviews the foreign crews demanded in which they asked precisely the same three questions. The only difference was that this time the cameras pointed at the interviewers half the time so that shots could be amassed of them nodding, looking serious and generally empathising.

Each camera crew had also brought its own local celebrity homosexual or lesbian with them to provide mother tongue testimony to the audience back home. These middle-aged, shaven headed individuals spoke in supplementary interviews about how the situation here was exactly the same as it had been back home in Copenhagen, Hamburg and Stockholm twenty years ago, how they had felt the frostiness when holding hands or checking into double rooms as single sex couples and above all, how they felt it was important to be here to show solidarity with the brothers and sisters before the huge party that would round off the Megapride weekend.

Listening to them, Beacon had the distinct impression that they rather missed the days of underground clubs and danger now that they were all paunchy graphic designers and psychologists. He said as much to the martial woman in the T-shirt when he finally managed to get her to himself.

She smiled knowingly. "Yes, they can be a little patronising. As if they did everything right and we can only follow in their footsteps." After a little thought she added: "But they are here to literally follow in our footsteps in the parade, so their hearts are in the right places. Plus of course, most of them have some very good stories to tell when they are a little drunk..."

Her name was Tigra and she was the head of the main - and in fact only - gay rights group in the country. All the legal challenges, all the logistics, all the liaison with police and authorities passed through her. Considering that fact she seemed remarkably calm and composed. Beacon asked how she managed it.

"It is quite simple," said Tigra. "I know that our opponents will be highly emotional. If they are not emotional they will not have any force to their arguments, as their arguments are in reality not arguments but emotional outbursts. So we must let them be the emotional ones, the erratic ones who may do anything. We will do exactly what we planned, what we agreed with the authorities, and we will do it in a civilized way. When this is repeated every year, I believe people will quickly see who presents more of a threat to public order on days like this. While they accuse us of being morally depraved, we will steal the moral high ground from them."

"Is she molesting you, Beacon? It's the power, it goes straight to her head!"

The Vidalish voice in Beacon's ear was that of Justs, whom Beacon had known professionally for some years. The first and still most prominent 'out' gay in the country, he had forged a career as a journalist and broadcaster by the simple expedient of having views on everything and an articulate gregariousness that lent itself perfectly to being a columnist and commentator. Whatever the subject, Justs could fill an hour or a page of print with intelligent and interesting views. Plus he had the added distinction of being the country's "top gay" as he jokingly described himself.

Tigra gave Justs a highly proficient punch on the upper arm.

"See, the violence has started already. She's one of them!" cried Justs in mock terror.

"I certainly am," said Tigra before excusing herself, aware that her brief soliloquy on the moral high ground had already given Beacon every quote he needed.

"So will you be joining us tomorrow, Beacon? Will you be putting your best foot forward, so to speak?"

"I'll certainly be there somewhere."

"But on which side of the fence, Beacon, on which side? Or will you be sitting on it as usual? I wouldn't recommend it - the railings in that park are extremely sharp. Ouch!" He

made a face suggestive of a sudden pain in the backside.

“Actually that's what I came to see you about. Justs you are a man of the world...”

“And how!”

“...so I thought it was about time you told me about the twelve different things you and your friends get up to in the privacy of your own bedrooms.”

“What on earth are you talking about, Beacon?”

“I was talking to Pastor Smits earlier...”

“Ugh! And I thought it was a blocked drain...”

“...and he has some interesting theories about gay life.”

“You're telling me! I'd love to see what goes on in that grubby little mind of his.” Justs shivered. “On second thoughts, no, please spare me. I mean can you imagine? Him? Doing... IT?”

Justs' sudden circumspection made Beacon laugh out loud and wonder what sort of sex life Pastor Smits did enjoy – if 'enjoy' was the right word.

“Funnily enough, no I can't. But he can certainly imagine you doing 'IT' as I think this will show.”

Beacon pulled Pastor Smits' scarlet folder from under his arm and passed it to Justs who immediately began rummaging through it and laughing hysterically.

“Well, well, well, what a catalogue of... oh my God he's got ME in here... and again... and again... Beacon I feel violated!” Justs said, squirming for effect.

“Yes, he seems to be quite a fan of yours,” said Beacon. He's even altered a few of the pictures.”

“So he has, so he has. Well, THAT'S very kind of him, the little dear, though I am afraid it is physically impossible unless one happens to be a circus performer. Who would have thought he had such a vivid imagination? Tigra, you HAVE to see this!”

Justs scuttled off into the crowd to find Tigra. Soon he heard wild laughter from the other side of the EU House that got louder and louder as more and more people joined in. Clearly the Twelve Sins of Satan were proving to be a hit.

The tears were running down Justs' face when Beacon tracked him down again.

"Oh Beacon, can we keep them? The Twelve Deadly Sins?"

"I should give them back."

"I suppose you should. We may be damned but we're not thieves after all. But Tigra has had the most wonderful idea. Can we keep them for just an hour? Pretty please?"

"Okay. How could I refuse?"

"I wish all the boys said that Beacon, I really do," Justs smiled and scuttled away on a mission.

* * * *

It was a beautiful day for religious frenzy. The sky was a clean azure, the grass and paths were as neatly arranged as a green-checked tablecloth and all around the park railings Pastor Smits and Holy Anton Lebed had planted large wooden crosses. They had originally intended to douse these with petrol and set them ablaze, but police and firefighters had told them this would not be permitted.

This however was the only evidence of cooperation between the two factions. Pastor Smits had possession of the eastern flank of the park, while Lebed's shock troops lay in wait along the southern railings. The police owned the western section and the Megapride revellers were to arrive from the north.

Beacon performed a full circuit of the park, using his press card as a sort of low-rent diplomatic passport at each corner to gain access to the next side of the large quadrangle. On the way he picked up a few quotes from each faction that might prove useful, most of which were of the predictable type favoured by his editors. Only one young man from the Lebed brigade, sporting an unsuccessful moustache, sounded a note beyond orthodoxy by offering: "I'm a big fan of Freddie Mercury, even though he died of AIDS. But that... THAT is disgusting!" as he pointed through the railings at a rainbow banner fluttering above a coffee stand inside the park.

Both Pastor Smits' and Lebed's fans were liberally endowed with placards bearing slogans and images that were certainly eye-catching but would never have been allowed into news print. One of the rules of the modern press was that when a group of people was expressing rather boring views, the most extreme of their number should be the one to supply a quote, whereas among a group of extremist wingnuts such as these, a moderate voice should be sought.

Similarly, all the placards depicting anal sex or the hoped-for hanging of gays would have

to be ignored in favour of one expressing something worthy of being printed in a family newspaper, such as a brimstone Bible quotation.

As the crowds built to perhaps a thousand strong on each side of the park, a sense of expectation grew that reminded Beacon of his student days watching first division football matches. He saw Pastor Smits issuing final instructions to his lieutenants, using the full force of his voice to work them up into a God-fearing frenzy. He caught snatches about “snakes” and a good deal of “smiting” before Pastor Smits suddenly dropped to his knees in prayer. His deputies immediately followed suit and so did a large proportion of the crowd. Solvita was among them. A hush of sorts descended.

“Lord, give us strength this day to fight the good fight!” Pastor Smits intoned, the knuckles of his hammy hands showing white as he kneaded them.

“Yea, verily Sodom has entered into our city by an underhand route. We swear we shall bear witness to it and do all in our power – with your help – to prevent its spread beyond these hellish gates. Save our children from contracting this dreadful disease, we beseech thee! For you have promised to deliver us, and as it is written in 2 Corinthians Chapter 7 Verse 1: Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God. Amen!”

“Amen,” they said.

Seeing that his rival had stolen a march on him, Holy Anton Lebed leaped onto a portable platform he had thoughtfully brought with him.

“Death to the Sodomites!” he screamed into a bullhorn.

“Amen!” they said and a general clamour ensued as the two factions began a chanting competition to see which of them was the most vocal and holy.

Meanwhile, from the other side of the park, whistles and a samba rhythm drifted across the well-kept lawns and through the railings. The gays were approaching! The excitement among the Xtians was so intense, it might easily have been mistaken by passing tourists as an ecstatic welcome for some all-conquering local sports champ – were it not for the placards suggesting the sports champ had won his medals for extremely unorthodox gymnastics.

Anxious not to be caught near the railings when the sides came face to face, Beacon pushed his way with difficulty through the crowd until he came upon Pastor Smits. His bullfrog face broke into broad grin.

“Mr Beacon! I am delighted to see you here! I knew you were not one of them! Will you take an egg?” He offered a tray of eggs.

“No thank you, I breakfasted earlier. Are these really necessary?”

“We will not fire first - unless we are sorely provoked! The Lord is my stronghold and salvation – of whom shall I be afraid! Psalms 27:1.” He was working himself into quite a state, partly as a result of glancing across at Lebed who was hopping about on his platform like a chimpanzee receiving a series of electric shocks.

“I just wanted to give you this,” Beacon shouted. He handed Pastor Smits the red folder of the Twelve Sins of Satan and left without another word, elbowing his way to the rear of the crowd and crossing the street to the entrance of an apartment building. As he climbed the stairwell to the first and then second floors the sound of samba music became louder. So too did the noise from the protesters, who were now at the rending of shirts stage of religious ecstasy. Their filthy placards bobbed up and down, the crowd surged towards the iron railings and arms reached through, clawing at the air in the manner of Dore's illustrations from Dante.

Beacon looked out from a window in the stairwell, which mingled the competing sounds of the crowd, of Lebed and Smits' bullhorns, of the drums and whistles of the crowd, of police sirens and a passing tram into one huge roll of righteous thunder.

He could see the whole park now, the luminous yellow line of the police waiting in reserve on the far side, the twin flanks of fanatics below him and the multicoloured Megapride procession itself, meandering along the paths of the park like some giant school outing. As they got closer he could make out Tigra and Justs, hand in hand, people dancing, swinging their arms and spinning like dervishes, as if a tremendous circus had arrived to entertain the inhabitants of some grim town from the writings of Emile Zola.

Now the bombardment commenced. The hens of the country must have been exhausted during the previous week, such was the volume of eggs hurled by the protesters. An omelette to feed the five thousand at the sermon on the mount could easily have been produced, but instead all the ovoid projectiles produced was a mushy mess that spoiled the neatly-clipped lawns of the park.

Nevertheless, the chicken-based fusillade had not gone unnoticed by the Megapride participants. Displaying a sudden order that must certainly have been the doing of Tigra, they formed up into a classic fighting front, even taking the extraordinary step of stepping onto the grass which they had hitherto assiduously avoided. Ranged in front of the protesters but still out of range, they might have been noble and colourful Zulu warriors paying tribute to a worthy foe before overrunning them without mercy.

They stopped their whistling and their drumming and they stopped their dancing. It was enough to make even Lebed and Pastor Smits fall momentarily silent, wondering what would happen next.

Then, as if from nowhere, the Megapride supporters suddenly hoisted aloft their own placards. These were no hand-painted, nail-and-chipboard affairs. These were professionally-printed, impressively designed and most striking of all, of such huge size that each had to be held aloft by several people.

Beacon let out a little whistle as the giant placards were revealed. Even from this distance it was perfectly possible to see in the minutest detail what they depicted: the Twelve Sins Of Satan, as drawn by Pastor Smits in his schoolboyish style of draughtsmanship.

Beacon knew they were drawn by Pastor Smits for two reasons: first, he had seen the same startling drawings, in miniature, inside the red folder that the preacher had left behind in the French cafe. But second, and more importantly in the current context, each of the vast squares contained, instead of a slogan beneath the psychologically revealing images, a prominent picture credit: "Design by Pastor Juris Smits" plus a large 'smiley' face.

Quite what effect the Megapriders had hoped to have on their opponents Beacon did not know. But the protesters were thrown into tumult. A wave rippled through their ranks which suddenly parted like the Red Sea so that a lumpy, amphibious-looking figure could scuttle away from the railings as fast as his legs would carry him, a red folder clearly visible against his black coat. The silence held for a moment and then the mass of indignant Xtians closed ranks again and set off in immediate and hot pursuit. Soon it was impossible to see the figure hurrying away as he was swallowed up by the city streets with the baying pack closing fast.

The sound of samba music resumed in the park. People started to dance. The middle aged Scandinavian supporters of the event made mental notes to pace themselves, for it would be a long night of partying ahead and they were no longer as young as they were back in the good old days of discrimination.

* * * *

Miss Parsla looked at the clock above the library door for a fourth time and shuffled a pile of magazines containing all of Pastor Smits' favourite titles: *Rumour Mill*, *Party Hard* and *In Crowd* into a neat stack. It was nearly four o'clock, the time when she and her girls would put everything back in its proper place, lock the filing cabinets, empty the wastebasket and switch off the photocopier, which always gave a little sighing sound as if it had been holding its breath all afternoon.

There was still no sign of Pastor Smits. As the clock ticked around towards the narrow-digits of '12', she glanced at her colleagues. They were looking at the clock, too. The seconds ticked down until at last the long, slim hand achieved the vertical and the time became 16:01. There was no sound in the library but something like the echo of a cheer from a very long way away.

END