

# 1 January A NEW YEAR

A new year and a new beginning. Allow the House of Alijn to take you on an exploration of the different phases of life. In each room we will focus on a different aspect. Because the everyday is anything but ordinary. Daily occurrences set the rhythm of our lives. Days become weeks, months become years.

Since time immemorial, spring has been seen as marking the dawn of a new year. When Christianity comes along it puts an end to this pagan habit, invoking 1 January as a day of prayer and penance to celebrate the circumcision of Jesus, one week after his birth. For many, however, the new year starts on a different day each year, depending on their calendar and belief.

Well into the latter half of the twentieth century, we continue to share our new year's tidings with postcards. This custom becomes popular after the First World War due to cheap printing techniques and the lower cost of stamps. The cards depict winter scenes, drawings or religious symbols. On the back is room for a personal message. These days we simply send a text message or share our new year's greetings on social media.

With knocking knees and trembling hands we continue the Flemish tradition of reading out our new year's letter in front of our family. Then it's fingers crossed for a nice prezzie from our parents or godparents. *Yours sincerely, your little rascal!*

## 22 January WAKE UP!

This third Monday of January is the saddest day of the year, Blue Monday. Most of our new year's resolutions have already been abandoned. It's cold. The weekend is just a memory. The alarm clock is ringing far too loud and far too early.

What a difference compared with the experience of our ancestors, who live in sync with the rhythm of the seasons. The weather and the sunlight determine how they spend their days. Over the years, a more precise means of measuring time becomes essential. An exact hourly schedule thunders into our lives with the advent of trains. With the rise of factories comes the necessity of shift work. Schools and government institutions still adhere to the traditional daily routine. Nevertheless, more and more companies are opting for flexible working hours. Everyone takes a different approach to the 'sleep-eat-work' dynamic. Personal hygiene and nutrition are also gaining in importance. Our morning rituals are becoming more elaborate. We get up, brush our teeth, take a quick shower. Ice-cold water in a wash basin is a thing of the past. We browse the newspaper at the breakfast table. Cereals, bread with cheese or jam, fruit, coffee or tea.

Religious people start the day with a prayer. Muslims have salah, Jews the tefillah, and Christians the Angelus. But one thing is certain: no matter who you are, the alarm clock always rings too early and too loudly.

## 2 FEBRUARY BIRTH

A little card is poking through the letterbox. Hurray, I have arrived! Friends announce the birth of their child. At the bottom is a reference to the birth register. A baby shower will soon follow. The most common first names in this country are Emma and Lucas, Mila and Mohammed – no longer Godelieve or Jozef.

The message on the card reflects the way we look at birth. It's a party, that's for sure. Champagne is popped in the maternity ward. Cake is shared out. The traditional candies known as suikerbonen (literal translation sugar beans) are available in all shapes and colours.

Our habits with respect to pregnancy and birth change from generation to generation. Baby-filled bellies are shown off with pride today, not hidden away like they used to be. There are fewer taboos surrounding pregnancy and sexuality than there used to be. In the Islamic tradition, children are ritually washed on the seventh day after their birth. The baby's head is often shaved, too. For Christians, the christening ceremony is no longer a given. With the decline in church attendance, the practice of this sacrament has largely disappeared.

The protective roles of godfather and godmother remain, however. Certain other traditions persist or are slowly but surely returning. The tradition of giving a new mother and her family freshly-prepared food or kraamkost has become popular again in recent years. Furthermore, mothers are increasingly choosing to give birth at home. This being said, most people still prefer to receive maternity assistance in the medical context of the hospital.

## 28 MARCH MOVING

Now that spring has sprung, it's time to switch to daylight savings time. Two becomes three. Or was it the other way around?

We move from our shared children's bedroom to our own bedroom, and not a day too soon. It is the first of many moves. Soon we'll be allowed to swap the bedroom of our parental home for a student room of our own. And, who knows, one day we may even have our own home.

Moving is always a step into the unknown. In many people this step awakens some uncertainty or even nostalgia. We are saying goodbye to our trusted home, our neighbours, our school, our community. We gather up all our things in cardboard boxes. Discoloured family photos, old clothes and long-forgotten toys stir up memories. We have to choose: what do we take with us and what do we leave behind?

Moving home remains an exceptional occasion until well into the twentieth century, however. Multiple generations live under the same roof. But the borders of our lives gradually start to shift. Family members move further down the street, to the other side of the village, to a big city or even abroad. The combination of goodbyes and new beginnings makes every move a bitter-sweet occasion.

## 6 APRIL DAY OF REST

Every year in Flanders, the first Sunday in April is observed as a kind of 'mass', a Flemish holiday. It is the day when the Tour of Flanders snakes through the landscape. We cheer the cyclists on. First from the side of the road, then flopped in front of the TV with a beer in hand.

The number of people attending actual mass is in decline. Pigeon racing and vinken-zetting (finch sitting) contests are endangered heritage. The car stays in the driveway, and the 'Sunday best', with its hat and tie, remains in the closet.

Sunday is still our customary day of rest. We might go for a cycle or a walk, visit family or have a more elaborate meal than we would during the week. Whether it's a home-made Sunday meal – of roast beef with croquettes followed by apple pie or baklava, for example – or a take-away meal. On this day time is on our side. So we can push the boat out a little.

Sunday's special significance arises from the Christian tradition, but these days it's not approached as such. Other religions still make time for a communal prayer on a specific day. The Jewish holy day, Shabbat, is Saturday. And Friday is the day Muslims pray at the mosque.

Sunday has been legally enshrined as a day of rest in Belgium since 1905. In many municipalities it is forbidden to mow your lawn on a Sunday. Schools are closed and shops are only open for a limited time, if at all. The prevalence of 'Shopping Sundays' is on the rise, however.

Sunday is a day prized by youth movements, football associations, local pubs and TV channels. On Sunday evenings, TV viewing figures are generally the highest, with viewers tuning into popular TV series, quizzes and gameshows.

## 13 APRIL (MIS)FORTUNE

The superstition surrounding a day like Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> exposes our vulnerability. We have a need for stories. A belief in supernatural and natural forces offers us comfort and support.

One of the explanations for the origin of our fear of this day is the combination of the Friday, the day Jesus was crucified, and the number 13, which is the number of people present at the Last Supper. But even this is relative. In many Spanish-speaking countries, Tuesday the 13<sup>th</sup> is the day to keep an eye out for trouble.

In addition to religious precepts, popular belief also contains a wide range of magical-religious symbols. Over the years we have attributed a protective role to an extremely diverse set of gestures, objects and plants. The cross. An image of St. Christopher for in the car. Eyebright or a mother's kiss to 'make it better'. Horseshoes, gnomes, a rabbit's foot. The Hand of Fatima. A four-leaf clover.

All supposedly stave off misfortune. Just like our personal lucky charms: a photo, a teddy bear or a certain item of clothing. Should we walk under that ladder or go around it, just to be on the safe side? Certain things may offer some people solace, but strike fear into the hearts of others.

## 7 MAY GETTING OLDER

On 7 May 2015, the oldest man living in Belgium at the time passes away. He is 106 years old and comes from a family of florists in Zaffelare. His death is national news.

Not so long ago it was seldom to witness golden wedding anniversaries, centenarians, or four generations of the same gender, for that matter. The whole village celebrates the man. The story is reported extensively in the press.

Now these things rarely make it to the newspaper, unless they are record-breakers like the man from Zaffelare. This attests to our significantly increased life expectancy. Thanks to improved healthcare, working- and living conditions, nutrition and hygiene, we now grow older than ever before. The increased average age brings with it new rituals, new phases of life and new family ties. While we previously worked until it was no longer possible, today's retirees fill their days with cycling, travelling and caring for their (great) grandchildren. Families comprise three or four generations, all supporting each other. They exchange stories and go on excursions together.

Although we like to hide our grey hairs and wrinkles, we attach a lot of value to wisdom and experience. Nostalgia is trendier than ever.

# 10 MAY GROWING UP

When Christian children celebrate their Confirmation on Ascension Day, with a new bike, picture cards for swapping, a traditional icecream lamb for dessert, they probably don't stop to reflect on the symbolism of the occasion. At around twelve years of age they start their transition to adulthood, both physically and mentally. Puberty begins. Previous generations have a religious ritual to mark the occasion, Confirmation. Catholics still celebrate in this manner.

But various other rites of passage have also become part of our country's traditions over the years. The Jewish bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah, the Islamic circumcision celebration of tahara, the Buddhist jukai initiation ceremony, or the secular celebration of spring. Each one marks a young person's coming of age. Every culture across the globe has its own rites of passage.

The First Communion and Confirmation represent the start and the pinnacle of the Catholic upbringing, respectively. They are preceded by extensive preparations, catechism in hand.

At the start of the previous century, Confirmation also stands for a social transition. From that day on, the twelve-year-olds are treated as adults. In addition to religious gifts, boys receive a razor for shaving or a pipe, while girls receive a kit containing table linen and cutlery for use after marriage. Communicants drink their first alcoholic beverage. And choke on their first cigar.



## 3 JUNE MOURNING

We are in mourning. A loved one has died and today is the funeral. The family has opted for a ceremony at the crematorium, followed by a reception with coffee and an opportunity to mourn out in the hay field. It's going to be a heavy day.

These days, unless the death is unexpected, most people die in a hospital rather than at home. The deceased is then taken to a specialised funeral home. Some religious movements are fundamentally against cremation.

In the case of our ancestors, it was the 'crying' of the church bell that announced a death. The body of the deceased remains at home for a number of days. Friends and family come to pay their last respects. A vigil is held, day and night, where friends and family weep, recite the rosary, and pray that the departed finds their place in the hereafter. Windows remain closed. Black clothing and a period of sobriety and silence are part of the strict rules of mourning.

On the day of the funeral, the church is packed to the rafters. The whole community walks behind the wooden coffin in a procession that leads to the cemetery in the heart of the village. Each grave is unique and its inscription carefully chosen.

Nowadays most churchyards are found at the outskirts of the village or town. The gravestones are becoming smaller and the urn garden is expanding. Many Muslims of foreign origin are buried in their home country. Forever in our hearts.

## 5 JULY YOUNG

The exams are over and done with and the summer holidays are upon us. For a short while, a meadow in Flemish Brabant becomes the centre of the country. Rock Werchter opens its doors, promising four days jam-packed with music and fun. The youth of Belgium look forward to it for months. Parents are concerned. What's with the youth of today?

Needless to say, there have always been young people. But it is only since the 1960s that we started to view them as a separate group, with their own interests, desires and codes of behaviour.

Young people like to differentiate themselves from the older generations. With music, fashion, hairstyles and language use they construct a new identity. This social hierarchy is highlighted by the media and advertising. They present the youth with role models and encourage them to consume.

The way young people view the world around them is evolving at a lightning-fast pace. From print newspapers and magazines to websites and now social media. From discussions as current events are unfolding to arguments in chatrooms.

According to Belgian law, we become adults at the age of 18. We get the right to vote and must bear full responsibility for our actions.

Military service is now a thing of the past. The duration and approach to military service is adjusted several times over the course of the last century according to the needs of the armed forces and the political situation in the world. Starting in 1963, conscientious objectors can choose from alternative forms of civil service.

The view of older generations with respect to younger generations remains unchanged. They still see a decay of morals and a decline in respect.

## 24 AUGUST HOLIDAYS

Everyone rejoices: the funfair is back in town. The merry-go-round, the hook-a-duck stand, candy floss and oliebollen (Dutch doughnuts). Maybe even bumper cars if you're lucky. It's one of the high points of the summer holidays.

In 1936 the *congé payé* or paid holiday is established by law in Belgium. Over the years the full-time working week evolves from 48 hours to 40 and eventually 38. Sports clubs, marching bands and theatre groups spring up like mushrooms. They can often be grouped into one of three political groups: Catholic, liberal or socialist.

In the early twentieth century, postcards are mainly sent from within the country. From spas or coastal towns. Our messages speak of health, food and religion. The food is tasty, the air healthy. Travel should be a responsible undertaking. It should strengthen the body and soul.

The advent of train transportation, the automobile and commercial flight goes hand in hand with the growth of our free time. We start to travel further afield. We take the bus to Lourdes, the car to Benidorm or the plane to the Turkish Riviera. The result is mass tourism, with tourists staying at camping sites and hotels. With a car full of luggage, Belgians of foreign descent visit their countries of origin.

Our cuisine becomes more varied. Exotic souvenirs appear in our living rooms. School holidays now go on for two months. The *bouwverlof* ('builder's furlough') is established as a norm. Youth clubs start their new calendar year, children become acquainted with their sports clubs.

# 1 SEPTEMBER SCHOOL

The time is upon us once again and there's no getting away from it. It's back to school for the nation's children. Their school bags are packed and their stomachs are aflutter. They are curious as to what their schoolmates have been up to all summer.

Education is compulsory, but school is not. Which means home schooling is an option. Today, full-time education is compulsory up until the age of 16 and part-time education up until the age of 18. Courses of study that consist of equal parts practical and theoretical lessons are generally accepted. Different kinds of education co-exist alongside one another. Further education at colleges and universities is no longer the privilege of the rich.

Boys and girls study shoulder to shoulder. They are educated in the same way. A Catholic religion class is just one of the options available. Moral Education or Islamic Studies can be taken instead. The use of computers and tablets in education is now a given.

The classroom of yesterday looks completely different. Students practice writing on slates, later progressing to pen and ink. Blotches and errors are met with little mercy. Writing with the left hand is out of the question. Order, rules and discipline take precedence. Teachers dole out punishment with the whip or by having pupils wear donkey ears. Boys and girls are educated separately in different schools. Boys are prepped for the role of breadwinner, and girls for the role of housewife. It's technology and science for the one gender, cooking and sewing for the other.

Certain traditions are still observed today. The school photographer still visits once a year, and games such as handjeklap ('patty cake') and marbles are still known to young and old.

# 18 SEPTEMBER MARRIAGE

Today is a happy day. We have been invited to the wedding of some good friends. After a short ceremony in the city hall, we drive to the reception venue. We're ready for an evening on the dance floor.

Getting married has long been a precondition for having children. We meet our husband- or wife-to-be at the ball and hope for our parents' approval. After the proposal comes the engagement, and the deal is sealed with an engagement ring. According to tradition, the bride and groom may not sleep together before their wedding night.

In the church we exchange rings, an intimate kiss and the promise of eternal fidelity. Through the good times and the bad. Upon exiting the church, our family and friends throw rice in the air above our heads. The wedding photographer captures the atmosphere.

In the wedding book our rights and responsibilities are written, and a number of pages are left blank for the birth dates and names of our future children. Families are a lot larger than those of today.

Nowadays marriage is an option, not an obligation. As of 2003, same-gender marriage is legally recognised in Belgium. Civil partnerships are popular, and divorce is by no means the exception anymore.

At many weddings, the first dance remains an important moment. The song Du by Peter Maffay is thankfully no longer a classic in the genre.

## 31 OCTOBER EVENING

It is 31 October 1953. The whole street is huddled in the living room of the neighbours' house and Halloween celebrations are still unheard of in Belgium. The neighbours in question are the first to get a television, the new invention people have been talking about for weeks already. We are curious. Moving images on a screen, what would that be like? It is half past seven and the television is silent. A woman appears in black and white. She welcomes us. A comedy starts. *Drie Dozijn Rode Rozen* ('Three Dozen Red Roses') starring Paula Sémer. We are glued to the screen.

Until now the radio has been the main medium by which to receive news in one's living room. In the evening, we, like many families, sit in a circle around the Leuven-style stove. We keep ourselves warm with each other's stories. Rumours, jokes, fairy tales, anecdotes from the family history: it is an established pre-sleep ritual.

For those that cannot read or write, these stories are very important. We read the newspapers out loud to each other. 'Mister Pastor' comments on current affairs in his weekly sermon. Pedlars sing about legends and the dramas of the day. Children stare open-mouthed at the puppet show. Comic strips speak to the imagination of young and old.

Our bookshelf slowly becomes full. An encyclopaedia, a bible, a book on DIY or cooking, collectors' books on footballers or film heroes, *The Sorrow of Belgium* by Hugo Claus.

These days we watch TV on multiple screens. The Leuven stove is a museum piece. And who still remembers Paula Sémer?

## 5 NOVEMBER HOUSEKEEPING

It's autumn in Belgium. Daylight saving time ends and we are plunged into darkness. Not only do we come home with a runny nose, our shoes are plastered with mud and fallen leaves. The yearly autumn cleaning is becoming urgent.

At least, that's how it was in the past, when dienstencheques ('service vouchers') could scarcely be dreamt of. In the mid-twentieth century, a housewife with four children spends approximately sixty hours a week on household chores. Washing, cooking and looking after the children: it's a never-ending responsibility.

Starting in the 1950s, we start to see one domestic appliance after another appearing on the market. They're all electrically powered and relieve us of a lot of work. The streets are awash with advertisements. Every appliance is better, quicker and more hygienic than the competition. Vacuum cleaners, irons and kitchen mixers are available in all colours and sizes. And all are fighting to win over the potential customer. In the consumer society that grows up after the Second World War, more and more homes get electricity, gas and running water. We eagerly cut out saving stamps and housekeeping vouchers from the newspaper. Our spending power increases.

But not every appliance turns out to be as useful as the adverts suggest. Electric can openers or croquet makers enjoy a short-lived hype before disappearing into boxes in the attic. Keepers include the refrigerator, freezer, and most of all the washing machine. This last innovation saves the housewife up to two days.

## 6 DECEMBER PLAY

In Belgium, 6 December is a day of toys and marzipan. We think back to the songs of our youth. *Zie ginds komt de stoomboot* ('Here comes the steamboat'). Daar wordt aan de deur geklopt ('Someone's knocking at the door'). *Sinterklaas kapoentje* ('Nicholas, I Beg of You'). These little songs are impossible to get out of your head. Still, some lyrics seem way overdue an update. 'Saint Nicholas, come inside with your servant' sounds very out of date now.

Until recently, the task of *Zwarte Piet* ('Black Pete') was to dole out punishment. His birch rod instils fear. Bad children are bundled into his sack. Today he is the playful companion of *Sinterklaas*, carrying a sack full of sweets and toys.

Every generation of children looks forward to the arrival of *Sinterklaas* with great anticipation. Days before, we leave out a sugar cube and a carrot in our shoe and a bottle of beer beside it. On 6 December we can't get out of bed quick enough. What if he hasn't come?

The toys that *Sinterklaas* drops down the chimney serve reflect the prevailing zeitgeist and prosperity of society. In the past, much-desired toys included wooden rocking horses, tin soldiers, Barbie dolls and hula hoops. These days it's often video games and Disney princesses that are high on the wishlists of children. Hey, listen, do you hear knocking?