

NO FILTER

LIEVEN VANLOMMEL

**THE ENTREPRENEUR BEHIND 300 MILLION
HEALTHY AND AFFORDABLE MEALS**

Lannoo
Campus

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FROM CHUBBY KID TO DOER

What worked. What didn't.

You can always reinvent yourself

It doesn't matter how others see you or what label you've been given. If you truly want to change something, you just do it. And you keep going.

Real connection is not about popularity

You can play the clown, be the joker, or the rebellious outsider. But the people who truly matter are the ones you find by listening and being there, not by acting foolish.

Choose value over success

Money, status, fame... they can disappear in the blink of an eye. Build something that is stronger than your name. Something that can stand on its own, even without you.



LIEVEN IN 1978

FROM CHUBBY KID TO DOER

I want to make the world better, in my own way. By helping people live healthier lives and eat healthier food. That is not some grand, purely theoretical idea. No. It is something that was always there, and that feels completely natural to me.

My starting point was not ideal. I was born overweight. Simple as that. Everyone around me seemed either athletic or academically gifted, and I was neither.

1925

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Lieven's great-grandfather is a fruit and vegetable merchant, selling his produce by bicycle. The next generations continue his work. His children start a wholesale business.



At home, that contrast was often made painfully clear. One of my brothers was athletic, the other was top of the class. And my father made sure to underline that too.

I was the average one, the one who did not excel at anything. And at school, I did not fit in anywhere either. That got me thinking. I asked myself: Okay, I may not be the cleverest or the most athletic, but what *can* I do? What did I have to offer?

The answer was actually very simple. I was good at helping people. That gave me energy. That was where I could make a difference. That realisation did not come overnight, but grew along with what I began to experience myself.

When, around the age of twelve, I decided to cut out sugar and start exercising, I changed physically. But the real gain was mental. My self-respect grew and – perhaps even more importantly – I noticed that by living a healthier life, you can take control of your own sense of happiness.

That confirmed what I already knew, really.

You do not have to just let everything happen to you. You can adjust. And small, conscious choices can make a big difference.

That insight became the core of everything I do: Healthy food and exercise help people live happier lives.



BROTHERS BENJAMIN (LEFT) AND PIETER-JAN (RIGHT)

**“I WAS GOOD AT HELPING
PEOPLE. THAT GAVE ME
ENERGY. THAT WAS
WHERE I COULD MAKE
A DIFFERENCE.”**

YES, FOODMAKER WANTS TO BECOME THE GREEN MCDONALD'S

My entrepreneurship is a direct result of that. Where other people see problems, get stuck or simply walk straight past what is happening right in front of them, I see an opportunity. I look at a situation – an empty building, a process that is not running properly, a gap in the market – and I immediately see what can be done with it. Not for a quick profit, but to build something that will remain interesting in the long term.

I cannot help analysing how I can strengthen something, how I can make it relevant for the future.

That drive to keep optimising and adding value is the engine behind everything.

It is the basis of Foodmaker.

Nearly thirty years after I opened my first salad bar in the GB, in the Grand Bazar shopping centre under Antwerp's Groenplaats, we are at a turning point. So why this book, and why now? Because the ambition is bigger than ever.

I want to become the green McDonald's, and I have the team to make that happen. That may sound strange coming from someone who swears by organic fields and ultra-fresh food, but it is about scale.

1960

**MATTIE'S DAD
HAS THREE
SUPERMARKETS**



WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF A REVOLUTION. OUR FOODMAKER CAFÉS ARE ONLY THE BEGINNING.

Healthy eating should not be a privilege for the happy few. No, it should be available everywhere, within everyone's reach. Just as accessible, fast and affordable as a fast-food chain, but with ingredients that truly nourish your body. People who buy our products save time and become healthier. It costs just as much to make it yourself, but this is simply a whole lot faster. Since the start, we have operated at cost. The profit? We obviously make that in our production. But the real added value is mainly in the fact that people feel better thanks to our meals.

We are in the middle of a revolution. Our Foodmaker cafés are only the beginning. I do not believe in one universal truth, but I do believe in results. Your body reacts to what you put into it. That is biology, not marketing. If you can turn that into your business – as I did, as we do every day with the entire team – then you do not have a job, you have a mission.

Even if I win the lottery tomorrow, I will keep doing this. Because it is important and it makes sense.

HAPPINESS FORMULA: FOUND

I genuinely believe that people are born with the capacity for happiness, but that their surroundings and the things that happen to them can gradually suffocate that happiness. As an entrepreneur, I have the unique opportunity to steer that environment in a positive direction. That is a responsibility I take seriously. Because let's be honest: by being unhappy yourself, or by creating a negative company culture, you are not helping anyone move forward.

That belief is the engine behind my ambition, and it is also my biggest pitfall. My urge to help and to keep innovating all the time also puts enormous pressure on the organisation sometimes. I do not want to make 150,000 meals a day. I want to make one million. I want to change the world, and I want to do it now.

I have to keep managing that boundless drive. Because if my ambition makes my own team unhappy, then I have completely missed the point. Helping people has to remain the essence, even as we scale up.

It is exactly that tension – between my personal drive, the business growth of Foodmaker, and the human happiness behind it and around it – that forms the thread running through this story.

This book is my way of sharing with you the insights I have gathered over all those years. I hope it inspires you to take a critical look at your own habits and your own environment, and that you discover what really helps you progress. Do not use this story as a manual to follow blindly, but as a catalyst for your own happiness formula.

Because ultimately, with this book, what I mainly want to do is what I have been working on with heart and soul for thirty years: helping others thrive and find their best selves.



CHUBBY KID DEALING IN THE TOILETS

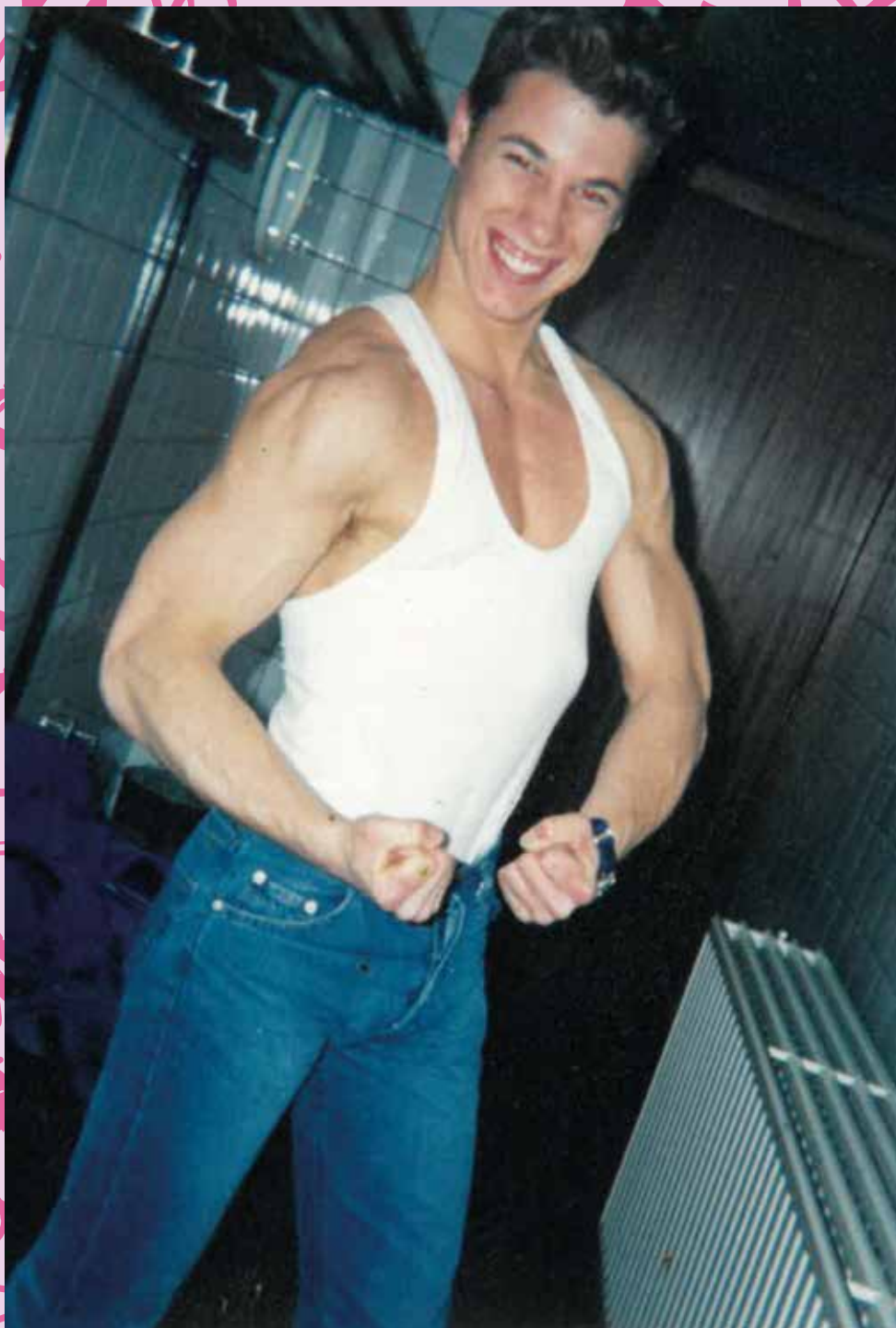
The most important things I learned during this period:

**You can always
reinvent your-
self.**

It does not matter how other people see you or what label they have given you. If you really want to change something, you just do it. And you stick with it.

**You are the one
with your hands
on the wheel**

If you are not happy with the way things are going, take a good look at yourself and take responsibility. You are the one making the decisions.



CHUBBY KID DEALING IN THE TOILETS

Tessengerlo, Mol, back to Tessenderlo, Diest, Koksijde, Brussels. Home was everywhere and nowhere to me. In Tessenderlo, everyone knew my family and my surname – the legacy of my grandparents. Everywhere else,

I was the odd one out, the new kid. In Diest, I was the kid walking around in a silk Costume National shirt and Bikkembergs shoes; in Koksijde, I was the one quietly chopping vegetables and doing the washing-up.

1987

LIEVEN'S PARENTS OPEN A GREENGROCER'S IN DIEST

Lieven's mother, Mattie, starts experimenting with vegetable salads. Instead of mayonnaise, she adds yoghurt dressing to her salads to preserve the flavour of the vegetables. Mattie's salad bar becomes a great success in Diest and the surrounding area. Before long, Mattie is asked to produce larger quantities for retail. A new, larger kitchen is built.



Home was first my parents' supermarket and later their greengrocer's, De Halle. It smelled of freshly chopped carrots, celery and lettuce. When I came home from school, I would throw my schoolbag into the hall, grab a plate and pile it high with vegetables from the metres-long salad bar. It was a treasure chest. My world was a counter full of vegetables, replenished every morning.

They say I weighed four and a half kilos at birth. That earned me the nickname 'Chubby Kid' – from my father too. I was a chubby child, and no good at sport. The one who was never picked for the team in PE. I was Lieven, the average one. The second of three sons, the one in the middle. On one side there was Pieter-Jan, my clever older brother, blessed with movie-star looks. And on the other side there was Benjamin, who was brilliant at sport. I was in between. Not especially clever, and not especially sporty. Average Lieven. Not really good at anything. I just stood there and watched.

That had to change. And when I was twelve, I decided I was done being average. And I was definitely done being Chubby Kid. I stopped eating sugar and swapped my chocolate spread sandwiches for plates piled high with vegetables. I also started exercising intensively. It was an all-in decision I made as a very young lad, but I stuck to it. And it would shape my life. Because from that moment on, I tackled everything the way I would later tackle Foodmaker: with total dedication, and with a discipline many people would call obsessive. I was done being Chubby Kid. Lieven became Rambo.

FROM CHUBBY KID TO WILD LIEVEN

In those years, I went to school in Turnhout. I was a boarder there, among the rich kids who were neatly dropped off every Monday morning by a chauffeur-driven car. Not me. I took the bus or, on rare occasions, arrived in our battered old Peugeot.

My parents were busy with their business. By then, they were running several businesses – plural. They didn't just sell vegetables at De Halle, they also had hospitality customers. And they supplied vegetable salads to supermarkets. They worked incredibly hard. So in fifth year of primary school, I went to boarding school with the Jesuits in Turnhout. A very strict school, where expectations were high. Before the school year had even properly started, I could already feel that I was behind. I had to find a way to stand out differently, because it certainly wasn't going to happen in the classroom.

So that was where I became Wild Lieven, the Lieven who was always up to something and turned everything into a joke. Who once shot at the monastery's iron doors with an air rifle. Who went out at night to steal straw bales from the fields and build a camp with them in the woods (and then pretended he knew nothing about it). The one who dramatically bit into an apple during prayers in the chapel – yes, it was still that kind of era – and then threw the apple to the front. Unfortunately, right in front of the prefect priest, who happened to be looking through the window at that exact moment. My ear still hurts when I think back to the way he dragged me to his office, while all my classmates' schoolbags and Samsonite cases fell to the floor as we passed.

THAT WAS WHERE I BECAME WILD LIEVEN, THE LIEVEN WHO WAS ALWAYS UP TO SOMETHING AND TURNED EVERYTHING INTO A JOKE.

So I also became the Lieven who came home by bus every Friday and then had to explain that he had detention again. The first question my mother asked me when I arrived on Fridays was: 'So, how many hours of detention did you get this week?' And the answer was the same every time: 'The maximum. Four hours.' My mother would sigh. Then we would get in the car and drive to the baker's, for a little cake, and to discuss how we were going to tell my father this time. Every week, he hoped things had gone better. They had not. I was breaking the rules left, right and centre.

So yes, that was the Lieven I was. In Turnhout, at least. And after two years of getting up to mischief there, it was clear that I was not entirely in the right place with the Jesuits. By then, we had moved to Diest, and it also made more sense for me to go to middle school there. Closer to home, and the same school my brothers went to.

A LITTLE BOX OF VEG FOR THE TEACHER?

At school in Diest – in the first and second years of secondary school – I learned the language of supply and demand. A language I understand without a dictionary. How did that work? Well, as one of the only pupils, I was allowed to go outside at lunchtime, to leave the school.

Normally to go and eat. But I had other plans. Because I wasted no time making the most of that freedom by stocking up at the local Delhaize for my little trade. I bought hot sausage rolls, cigarettes, drinks and chewing gum, and then sold them on in the school toilets. At a profit, of course. There was good money to be made. And suddenly I was popular. Not bad, as the new kid in a school where I knew no one and still had to earn my place. My little side hustle wasn't just good business, it was also a good way to earn my stripes.

Mind you, I may have been a trouble-maker in Turnhout, but in Diest I got into serious trouble too. I dealt in cigarettes and food. For instance, I once blocked the drain of the sink in the classroom with toilet paper. Then I turned the tap on full blast, so that by lunchtime the water was running down the walls from the third-floor window. After the break, we still had another lesson on the top floor. I thought: "If we pull something like this now, maybe they'll send us home early." It turned out a whole lot worse than we had expected. I had some explaining to do then. Me and the two classmates who had helped. I got detention, the others were suspended. I got away with it – as I often did.