

The City and Time

Jonathan Robijn

An extract

Original title De stad en de tijd
Publisher De Bezige Bij, 2013

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Brian Doyle

© Jonathan Robijn/Brian Doyle/De Bezige Bij/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

The Interloper

Early that morning, as Gustaaf De Geest opened the doors of his perfumery, located in a handsome townhouse on Adolphe Max Avenue, he couldn't escape the impression that the World Exhibition was about to turn his life upside, yet more than twenty years were to pass before he realised that his premonition had not betrayed him. The city was awash with colours and shapes, all of them unfamiliar to him, and in the last couple of weeks he had heard languages being spoken, the existence of which he had never even suspected. The newspapers were full of the Exhibition, and it was the only topic of conversation in the majority of middle-class drawing rooms. This was the first World Exhibition since the end of the Second World War, and the spectacular evolutions in the world of architecture and science had left no one indifferent. The world had advanced by leaps and bounds under this new reign of peace, and Gustaaf De Geest was confident that the Russians and the Americans would also return to the negotiating table in the not too distant future. Both nations were only a fraternal walk away from one another in Heysel Park and there wasn't even a whiff of rivalry in the air. It was clear from the newspapers that the eradication of fascism had made way for a new form of global governance, with statesmen at the helm. The Expo itself had also profoundly changed the planet's image.

He had visited it by invitation on one of the first days in the company of a group of politicians and businessmen, and it had impressed him deeply. He had called in at almost all of the pavilions but had avoided the Atomium. The sight of its construction left him convinced that it would only be a matter of weeks or months before one of the spheres yielded to gravity and the entire iron crystal collapsed in a heap. Everyone could see that the structure lacked stability and balance, and he found it difficult to understand why the authorities were prepared to take such a risk. One single storm would be enough to blow the spheres over. He knew that his attitude was just the same as that of the Parisian bourgeoisie who had been unjustifiably critical of the Eiffel Tower in 1889, but his friends had tried and failed to tempt him into a visit.

When his wife and two daughters asked if they too could visit the Exhibition he had agreed on the condition that they keep both feet firmly on the ground of Heysel Park, no matter what their companions – the daughter of the Swiss banker and the wife of the French consul – might suggest. They left in the morning, shortly after Gustaaf De Geest opened his doors for business.

Gustaaf De Geest's perfumery enjoyed much the same success as the extraordinary buildings in Heysel Park. The day after exploring the World Exhibition, contented foreign visitors would amble

along the city's broad boulevards, encounter some sweet smell drifting aimlessly in their direction, and follow it without delay to the doors of his perfumery. The secret of his success was both simple and ingenious in equal measure. Certain smells tolerated each other's presence and others did not. Gustaaf De Geest had learned from years of experience, beginning with his childhood when he would play in his father's perfumery, how to read people on the basis of their scent. He could smell what people thought. A couple of whiffs of personal odour were enough. He had his own workshop and it was thus relatively easy to determine the kind of perfumes that would please his customers. He had used this technique down through the years to acquire a level of fame that extended far beyond the boundaries of the city.

Gustaaf De Geest was also highly innovative. Around that time he had received a new delivery of lotus leaves, which he had mixed in his workshop with lavender oil, gum arabic, sandalwood, eucalyptus and fresh rose petals. He was wildly excited about the result and expected a surge of interest, perhaps even an order from the palace, where, according to reports, his bottles in the form of a stork filled with pure Sundew had even charmed the king a couple of weeks earlier.

The tiny decorative bottles tinkled in the still crisp morning breeze that wafted through the open doors along with the first clients, Egyptians. They stayed for no more than half an hour, and, as expected, indulged themselves in a bottle of vanilla-anemone oil. After that there wasn't a moment's peace to be had. In addition to the usual groups of German, French, Dutch and English visitors, he had assisted some South Americans who only spoke Spanish but left nonetheless with an infusion of sandalwood, Mongolians in traditional garb, Canadians who were impressed by his Arabian Nights, and Japanese. If it hadn't been for the lapel pin flags the latter were wearing, he would never have been able to distinguish them from the Chinese diplomats who visited his shop once a month. They had all left the premises satisfied. Clients seduced by his aromas, moreover, were not exclusively female. The majority in fact were men intent on surprising their sweethearts with a selection of *eaux de toilette* from Brussels. The same clients not infrequently returned a few days later, interested in a couple of extra bottles of the blend they had already purchased.

In spite of the unremitting to-and-fro of customers, an uneasiness had bothered him throughout the day. He knew that his women would obey him and not come to grief at the foot of the Atomium, but a nasty foreboding still haunted him. When the last customer had left the premises and he was busy securing the day's takings in the safe, he caught sight of a taxi through the window and saw three women emerge from it. He heaved a sigh of relief. They appeared to be in once piece, at least at first sight.

The women entered the shop in evident high spirits and embraced their husband and father. They barely noticed the perfumes that melted the hearts of his customers and didn't even ask how their father's day had been.

Paula was the most rational of the three and Gustaaf wasn't surprised that she had found the Russian pavilion the most impressive. Sputnik, the first satellite, and a hydraulic Kaplan Turbine in front of the Czechoslovakian pavilion had particularly taken her fancy. Isabella had been impressed by Le Corbusier's futuristic French pavilion and the various African pavilions, where exotic dreams from the colonies were unwrapped and on display in a variety of glass showcases. When the girls tried to recount how their mother had petted the most petted goat in the world in the Dutch pavilion they were helpless with laughter. They even continued their stories at dinner. Between two spoonfuls of asparagus soup, Paula reminded all present about the Arrow of Civil Engineering, Isabella recounted with excitement how the Portuguese pavilion had smelled of the sun, the sea and the beach, the Paula informed her family that she had seen for the first time how

chocolate eggs were made. When their father asked if they had visited the Atomium the three women giggled, confirmation as far as Gustaaf was concerned that they had obeyed his wishes.

Gustaaf De Geest and his wife Mathilda De Geest, née Mathilda Augusta Vorendries, were content that both their daughters were still at home. The same could not be said for their only son Marcel, however, who was preparing himself in Oxford for a career in the diplomatic service and was only expected to return from England the following summer. It went without saying that Gustaaf was worried about the future of the perfumery now that his son had decided to become a diplomat and he had no brothers or sisters of his own to take over from him. In order to maintain the family name and tradition, it had been decided that Marcel De Geest would become the official owner of the perfumery, and that Gustaaf would have to rely on one of his future sons-in-law for the day to day running of the business. He had particularly high expectations of Isabella in this regard. In his eyes, she still had the figure of a fifteen-year-old, she was elegant, mild-mannered and sensitive, and every man was seduced by her charms even without having to sprinkle her with the mysterious and exotic aromas of bougainvillea and agapanthus. Paula had her father's hard facial features, something that few men were able to appreciate. He and his wife talked about it regularly, but Mathilda did not consider it a problem and was convinced she would grow out of it in time.

Isabella had shown an interest in the eldest son of Firmin Claeys, who owned a bespoke tailor's shop in the Graaf Van Vlaanderen Street neighbourhood, but his wife wasn't quite yet of a mind to marry off her youngest daughter. Gustaaf De Geest had argued that the sooner a son-in-law could be introduced into the business, the sooner he could retire and the sooner he could withdraw to their holiday home in Nieuwkerke, where he planned to devote himself to literature and music, but his wife insisted that they should avoid hasty decisions and that they should not be guided by commercial interests when the happiness of their daughters was at stake, nor by the prospect of early retirement. When they asked Isabella's opinion, she answered that the eldest son of Firmin Claeys was a flirtatious and meddlesome squirt and that she would never consent to a marriage in spite of the fact that both families had been friends since time immemorial, not even as a favour to her father, a man she admired profoundly. Gustaaf De Geest considered asserting his authority, but the expression in his wife's face stopped him in his tracks. It went without saying that Gustaaf's biggest challenge was to initiate his successor into the mystery of bodily odours in all their diversity. Perhaps Marcel would change his mind in due course, he thought, once he came to realise what politics was all about.

Both girls were still brimming over with stories about the miracles they had witnessed at the exhibition. As the maid placed a terrine of stewed rabbit with prunes on the dining table, Paul observed that the Soviet Union was miles ahead of the United States in terms of technology, then Isabella waxed lyrical about the Asian pavilions and how their elegance had charmed her so, especially the modest and subdued Japanese pavilion. Paula announced that the pavilion of the European Coal and Steel Community had left her feeling that the countries of Europe would live in peace with one another from then on. Throughout the meal, both girls recounted what they had seen, heard, smelled and felt with hardly a pause for breath, giving the impression that they were intent on reporting every inch and every second.

When the maid brought a cup of coffee for Gustaaf, as she always did at the end of the meal, and a little bowl of rice pudding and brown sugar for his wife and daughter, Paula observed that the American pavilion had a colour television and predicted that black and white television would be obsolete in a couple of years time. Paula's reference reminded Isabella that one of her girlfriends had bought tickets to a jazz concert that coming Thursday evening at the American pavilion, and she asked her father if she could go. Gustaaf De Geest disapproved of the new jazz craze and his

misgivings made him hesitate at first, but a couple of winks from his wife were enough to convince him and he gave his permission.

When Isabella arrived home from the jazz concert that Thursday evening, her mother saw immediately that something wasn't right. Even her sister, who had already removed her make-up and was ready for bed, noticed that something had happened. Isabella sparkled, but managed nonetheless to keep the truth to herself at first. She maintained her poise, talked about how sultry, enchanting and melancholic the jazz music had sounded and how the acoustics in the American theatre were simply unprecedented in their clarity and how the Americans had been able to transform the most colourful dreams into reality. When Isabella was finished, her mother sighed deeply, recognizing, as only mothers can, that her daughter was all grown up. Paula suppressed a shiver of jealousy and smiled all the while. Gustaaf De Geest was experimenting in his workshop at that moment with essences of musk and mango and was completely oblivious to what was going on. As far as he was concerned, his daughter had been to a jazz concert and – most importantly – had returned home at a reasonable hour. Mathilda decided it was better not to tell him what she had seen in Isabella's eyes.

Gustaaf De Geest was completely taken aback when a man of foreign origin appeared in the shop asking to see his daughter; not Paula, the eldest, but Isabella, the prettiest. Gustaaf immediately smelled a rat and lied in response to the man's question, telling him she was not at home. The man spoke French and introduced himself as Jean Joseph Michel from Leopoldville, a member of the World Exhibition's organising committee. Gustaaf De Geest briefly toyed with the idea of calling the police, but he quickly realised that the facts as they were would be insufficiently incriminating. He nodded politely and asked if Mr Jean Joseph might perhaps be interested in a flacon of sandalwood oil. Jean Joseph kindly declined the offer. He took a couple of deep breaths, grinned from ear to ear and asked Gustaaf if he would be kind enough to pass on his warmest and most heartfelt greetings to his daughter, Miss Isabella. He then bowed discretely, turned and left the shop before Gustaaf had the chance to respond. He watched as the man walked away from his shop and realised what had happened. His misgivings had been justified after all. But he wasn't granted much time to think about the situation; a group of cheerful Cossacks burst through the doors at that very moment and before he knew it his hands were full, spraying scents and applying oils.

Gustaaf De Geest wished his wife goodnight and lay in the dark staring at the ceiling. It was only then that the situation returned to his thoughts. Why had he given his permission for that jazz concert at the American Theatre? Why had he let his wife convince him so easily? He had known for a number of days that there was something in the air. *Anything but this. No! Impossible!* He closed his eyes. *The very thought! Isabella... Never! From Leopoldville?* Perhaps she hadn't understood him properly? He started to chuckle softly and turned to his wife Mathilda, only to find that her eyes were closed.

He couldn't imagine Isabella starting something with a French speaking man, but he immediately understood that caution was advised. *Imagine.* Isabella floated through reality and was perfectly capable of fuddling her powers of judgement with dreams. She was curious, and when it came to love she behaved like an innocent bird. He remembered how she fell in love a couple of years back with the driver who brought her from Nieuwkerke to lace-making lesson in Bruges every day during the summer holidays. Then there was the more recent infatuation with the stable boy at the manege in Drogenbos where she kept her pony. She was even attracted to the cartoon characters who had been appearing on television with such frequency of late. No. Caution was definitely advised. She was not in full control of her emotions.

The man was bound to return, and then a firm response would be appropriate. He tried to remember how the man had smelled, but with the customers and all their comings and goings so much had already disappeared from his memory. A mild, unobtrusive smell had dominated, but Gustaaf De Geest was experienced enough not to trust his first impressions. It was a customer's residual odour that revealed his or her true character, and in the case of Jean Joseph he could no longer remember it. He recalled an odour of naiveté among the Cossacks, especially since he was still aware that he had sold them a couple of bottles of blue lotus oil. Not expensive, but very invigorating. After that he had served a group of Hungarians with bushy moustaches, in search of a magic potion that would give a shine to their whiskers. Pure pomegranate balsam had convinced them. But when he tried to recall how the claimant smelled he was at a complete loss.

Goodness, he thought, why am I fussing so much? She's sure to have forgotten him in a few days at most. He decided to keep a closer eye on his daughter and convinced himself that her feelings would pass. If the young man put in another appearance at the shop he would show him the door with a short but appropriate rejoinder: that sort of thing might be possible in Leopoldville, but not here. Why had his wife resisted the idea of a marriage between Isabella and the eldest son of Firmin Claeys? That still remained a mystery to him. He let himself be guided by his wife's emotions far too often, instead of following his own reason.

Gustaaf De Geest didn't have to wait long to deliver his short but appropriate rejoinder. Jean Joseph Michel from Leopoldville, member of the organising committee of the World Exhibition, appeared in the shop for a second time early the next morning asking if Mr De Geest had passed on Jean Joseph's kind regards to Isabella and what her response had been. Gustaaf De Geest felt the blood rushing to his head, but he kept his calm in the interests of propriety and answered politely that Miss Isabella had laughed heartily at his greetings and asked if the young man was suffering from a psychiatric infirmity. Jean Joseph seemed completely unperturbed and repeated his request to speak with Miss Isabella in person. Gustaaf insisted that a meeting was impossible and added with a certain urgency that the man should put Miss Isabella out of his mind. She was already engaged and would soon be married. Was Mr Jean Joseph perhaps interested in some eucalyptus salve? Highly effective for the treatment of watch-glass nails. Jean Joseph would be sure to see an improvement. Also useful for mammary gland conditions and abscesses of the sinus cavity. No, thanks, he was only interested in Miss Isabella. Eucalyptus salve was also available from one of the villages in the bush. He asked Gustaaf once again to pass on his kindest regards to Miss Isabella and said he would appreciate the opportunity to speak to her in person on his next visit. He then turned and disappeared as silently as he had appeared.