

Pebbles, chrome, silk, cedar, and anecdotes

If you eat raw carrot and almonds together it tastes like coconut; the carrot brings the texture and the almonds the taste. Combining the right elements in the right way creates the illusion. It's like with decorative painting. You try to work with the inherent qualities of something, a tool or a substance, understand how it interacts with variables like time and gravity and manipulate it to get it to do what you want.

I'd been cycling around the Atomium in Laeken Park and—having stopped for a snack—observed this as I munched my packed lunch: the Atomium had been recently refurbished. The last time I'd seen it up close it was seeming pretty shabby, but now its dulled surface was gleaming and reflecting the sunshine, and the park was full of people enjoying the unusually mild October, some picnicking like me. I bought a DVD in the Atomium giftshop, a compilation of home movies made at Expo '58 and I stayed up late watching them projected on my bedroom ceiling. The flags of the nations of the world waved in the cloudless sky, the cable cars carried visitors up the Avenue du Congo to the Atomium and back.

The following day I awoke with an odd, jaunty feeling, like I'd done something unusual or exciting the day before. But all that had happened was that the physical experience of my ride in the park and the recorded memories of those amateur filmmakers had fused together. It was like I'd really been to the Expo. The two separate experiences, real and vicarious, had overlaid themselves like the carrot and the almonds making coconut—and it felt amazing.

The idea of bringing a moment from the past to life by combining different sensory stimulations and engineering false memories stayed in the back of my mind. It seemed worth exploring further but I wasn't sure how; maybe building scale models? Wearing certain clothes? The opportunity to experiment finally came when I got the chance to visit the famous Palais Stoclet. It was exciting to visit somewhere so notoriously private: Would the house really warrant the mystique that we project on to it? I'd had a funny conversation with my driving instructor, a chronic bullshitter, who had claimed he had been inside and could draw the floorplan from memory. When asked about the interior design he replied vaguely that it was "pretty good." In preparation I tried to form as comprehensive an idea of the house as I could from photos and plans. I wanted the house's qualities—the smells, temperature, atmosphere—how your body felt moving through that series of volumes—to imprint naturally on everything I had memorized like a housebreaker.

The visit was as impressive as expected. We were a group of about ten locals, friends of friends of the Stoclet family, including one of my former professors at the Van Der Kelen Logelain school of decorative painting. We were on a tight leash: no photos and no wandering off. I wanted to experience the house as the family had, and I remembered the Geffrye Museum in London, which had suffered a sudden power cut during my visit there and where all the period displays were lit by natural light, like the interiors in paintings. In the Palais Stoclet I asked for the electric lights to be turned off, so we could feel the changes as the sun set. In the dining room, shadows accentuated the texture of the walls, and the semi-precious gemstones that embellished the Klimt mosaic came to life in the winter half-light. Under electric light the stones were flattened and lost in the orgy of surface pattern. As the other visitors had tea and biscuits in the kitchen, a ginger cat leisurely winding among them, I stayed alone in the dining room as darkness fell, everything simultaneously solid and fragile.

Instead of going out that night as planned, I cycled home in the rain to my Josef Hoffmann books. Meeting people right after would have cut the bond to the light and smells I was eager to preserve for as long as possible.

Could I enter the house again while asleep and wander around as I pleased? Maybe I would be able to spend some time in its double marble bathtub? I went to bed that night certain there would be some activity in my dreams. But my brain could not be so easily manipulated. While I did dream myself back into the Palais Stoclet, the walls of the interior had all been boarded up, clad with cheap wooden panels, as if to protect them from renovations or the Gillet Jaune protesters that had blocked off Arts-Loi on my journey to the house that day. I was too smart for myself. The Klimt mosaics were beyond my reach.

The experiment had not exactly failed, but if I was to concoct a formula to come close to time travel, I would need to manage the opposing forces in the human character that had stymied this attempt. On one hand there is the intense urge to indulge and articulate one's true desires. On the other is the controlling grip we have on our subconscious, which stops us being able to fully abandon and realize those fantasies. In the dream, whatever it was that contained and managed my id stepped in and blocked me.

Like with decorative painting, could you control the tools at your disposal to access the things beyond your control? Instrumentalize those necessary external forces? I thought about the dreamspace, where it can feel like outside influences are unfairly imposed on you; those sex dreams that come from nowhere and that can take days to fade.

Hormonal changes during a woman's cycle can be extreme; so extreme that they can be used to actually get high if you want, if you understand them. The heightened state of sexual or emotional sensitivity during ovulation can be intensified by stimulation, for instance with things like literature,

film, or music. I've devised a way to exploit the emotional receptivity that characterizes this stage of a cycle for my own pleasure. What I do is I patch together different media on the laptop to masturbate to; things that arouse in different ways. One pop-up window will have a film or TV scene that has erotic tension in the narrative. Something totally artificial, with beautiful and expensive sets, costumes, actors, and cinematography. Then I simultaneously play some generic porn in another open window to add a transgressive charge to the inherent conservatism of the TV show or film. They calibrate, providing what the other inherently can't.

There are a couple of actors that I cast in the film in my head about Adolf Loos and his wives (Loos has everything I need to get off: the elegant architecture, the theoretical posturing, roiling perversions, the buttoned-up bourgeois hypocrisy, cold, mad eyes, and hate-fucking). So, I add one of these actors into the mix, in a clip of something well produced like *The Crown* so I can see, and, equally important, hear the Loos stand-in. And I add some more open browser windows of Loos interior views to the desktop, for an intellectual, as well as libidinal, charge. It's not imaginative abandon—it's the opposite: controlled and managed.

I incorporated hormonal surges into my experiments with time travel; combining experiences of physical space with, in various measures, food, historical research, masturbation, structured narratives, and aural stimulus. By now I had a single goal in mind, to visit the Villa De Ooievaar in its heyday, when it was newly built in 1935.

The first successful teleportation to 1935 did not go well. (I will not outline here the formula that lead to the first concrete success, it will be part of the exhibition I am preparing for the Belgian Pavilion for the 2022 Biennale of Architecture in Venice, and there I will go into detail; indeed the final method will be an interactive element of the installation!)

The immediate problem when I arrived in 1935 was that my home is a converted industrial building, which back then was connected to the nearby abattoirs. I was completely unprepared to encounter all those workers and chilled carcasses which suddenly surrounded me, and I started screaming, which drew everyone's attention to me. The workers, it seemed, were both shocked and amused to see a strange woman in a Tintin T-shirt and bedroom slippers crawling around the floor in a blind panic. I was disorientated from the orgasm. A mob mentality came into immediate effect and I had my bum pinched, I was grabbed and hooted at as I stumbled about panicking.

On the busy street outside a nightmare was made real. Only I was partially dressed, no money, no home. Without my carefully orchestrated process, which needed planning, seclusion, and total relaxation, I would never be able to go back to 2020. I did not feel like a person from the future; I was shivering and alone. My young grandparents were far away.

Someone at the factory must have alerted the police because after being shooed out of successive door and alleyways—this part of Brussels was now black with smoke and full of working bustle—I was picked up for public disturbance and vagrancy. I wasn't arrested, but I was pronounced mentally ill by a police doctor and sent to an asylum where I immediately contracted tuberculosis and died three months later.

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Now, today, on the second attempt, I am much better prepared. In my suitcase I have some 1930s Belgian francs (bought off eBay) and a fake ID card adapted from one found at the Jeu de Balle flea market. I've packed my mooncup; there's no way I'm wearing one of those old sanitary pad belts! Condoms, deodorant, some antibiotics, modern underwear (Uniqlo). I spent a disproportionate amount of time putting together the capsule wardrobe of clothing that will now render me invisible in public. I have a dossier of important information, several notebooks, and a digital camera, the battery well charged. I also have a badge for the Flemish Nationalist party Verdinaso, stolen from the Museum of the Resistance in Anderlecht, which is very poorly invigilated.

This time on arrival I know what to expect. I just wipe my fingers on a handkerchief and stride around the abattoir storage as if I have every right to be there. The workers stare, but this time say nothing and keep on working as I climb up a ladder into the attic in my nice brown shoes and hat. I take a photo of where my bed usually stands. Then I climb down and head into the city center, always a bit lightheaded during ovulation and now euphoric that my method has worked. I feel well insulated in the anonymous respectability of my dark overcoat with money folded in its interior pocket. I try to keep my gawping and wonderment under control.

I check into the Hotel l'Esperance and take a long walk down to the Hippodrome drinking in the transformed city. I win 6,000 francs on a horse and cross it off my to-do list while riding the tram back to the center. This, the first night, it's like trying to sleep on a train, every little sound wakes me and even while I'm sleeping, I continue to make mental lists.

I decide to delay the journey to Ostend for a couple of days, while I calm down and find my feet. I need to mull over what it is exactly that I want to see at De Ooievaar. I do some sightseeing; the Worlds Fair in Laeken and the neighborhood that will be flattened to build the headquarters of the European Union. I take as many photos as I can, lots of selfies. I go shopping at l'Innovation and get my hair done. I see *The 39 Steps* and *La Kermesse héroïque* at the Eldorado, smoking through the double feature with everyone else.

It seems a good idea to be cautious, and I keep myself to myself, not fully understanding the social codes of being a woman alone in public in this place and time. Brussels isn't Paris; it's a small

bourgeois town and I will not take chances, not after last time. In the bar of the Toone Puppet Theatre, in the Marolles, I read in the right-wing newspaper *Hier Dinaso!* about the Nazis just over the border in nice towns like Aachen and Cologne. I picture them high on pervitin, doing each other's elaborate horoscopes, jumping on tables and telling each other how amazing they are, like a bunch of coked-up Wall Street twats. There is news in the international press of Malevich's death and the opening of the Moscow Metro. When I see the reproductions in *l'Illustration* of those statues in the Park Kultury station—big-boned, pigtailed swots reading poetry to each other and playing the piano—I squirm a bit in my chair and think, *Maybe I can do a bit more teleportation?* I keep the cutting just in case.

A week later, on the train to Ostend, I reread a text that I'd printed out from the internet and stuck into a notebook:

"For me, it is another theft. First, the Nazis took our house and now Mawer took our story. That novel isn't about our family, it is against our family. It makes me terribly angry." ... She also adds that despite Mawer's claims that the book is not about the family Tugendhat, things will get mixed up and at the end everybody will believe that this is the true story of the house and the family: "Why did he invent such a Mickeymouse-family where he tells incredible lies about my father? Can you imagine somebody writing a book about your parents full of lies? Without ever contacting anybody from the family? ... It is not a good book. The only reason it got famous is because he wrote about the villa Tugendhat. For me, they are parasites that want to get their glory out of the house."

It's a quote from Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat discussing *The Glass Room* by Simon Mawer, a novel based on the history of the Villa Tugendhat and Tugendhat family, who fled the Nazis in 1938 for Switzerland and, later, Argentina.

What do I want to do when I get to De Ooievaar? I understand Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat's point of view, and I don't want to intrude on the life of the owners of the house. But I want to see it, and them, get some photos to take home for future reference, and that means spying.

The changes to Ostend are unbelievable; I knew it had been busy when it was a working port, but the station is thronging with people: workers, fishermen, families on holiday. The train on the opposite platform is the Ostend-Vienna Orient Express, connected to the looming hull of the Dover boat by a thick line of transferring passengers.

My first idea had been to request an appointment by telephone with the doctor whose office was housed in Villa De Ooievaar. For this I had memorized a few phrases in Dutch, and I repeat them to myself, trying to perfect a Flemish accent, as I walk along the promenade against the wind. Stopping to breathe in the air and the scene at the ornate Kursaal, the sea comes much closer to the land than I know it to in 2020, large waves crashing and spilling over the beachfront. Like in Brussels,

small businesses are everywhere, factories and industry so close to the city center, horses and carts and cars mingling with the strolling tourists and fishermen. The city limits arrive fast, so I find a public telephone in a café and call the number for the doctor. No reply. I have a coffee and a cigarette and contemplate the next course of action.

When it was built, the house was at the outer limit of the town, looking onto fields. The busy industry and tourists are now behind me as I walk down a blowy open road dotted with only a few houses, either under construction or only recently inhabited. In approaching the villa, I see that it would not be easy to simply hang about and observe, there's nowhere to hide. So, I take out the Verdinaso pin, fix it to my lapel, and knock on the doctor's door decisively. There's no reply. I try again and crane my neck to see in the window, but it's too dark and all I see is my own scowling face under a little brown hat.

The daylight is fading, and I've not seen a single person or car since I turned off the promenade. This emboldens me to stroll back and forth in front of the part of the building where the family live. Again, the windows are dark, obscured by lacey curtains and rows of knick-knacks: a model galleon, statues of the Virgin Mary, and frog figurines. I push open the gate and bring into easy mental reach the Dutch phrases I had memorized, explaining that I am an architecture student and wanted to see the new Jozef De Bruycker building. Around the side lie abandoned children's toys and bicycles, but it's otherwise deserted, I just hear the crops blowing in the nearby fields. I continue cautiously along the terrace to the back of the building; if someone is inside they will surely see the trespass and come out to investigate. But the house seems as dark and empty as when I usually arrive.

The back door is open and the space beyond beckons. Instead of the 1990s fitted kitchen that I know, the doorway opens on to a small storage room full of children's rain boots and gardening equipment. I continue through into the day room, which is obscured by rapidly thickening gloom, I can just make out the recognizable shapes of the fitted units made of wood and marble. Reassured by how natural it feels to be back, I continue to the heart of the house, the dramatic entrance hall with its fountain, the stained glass window, and theatrical up-lighting. I can't hear any signs of life, but the clock is ticking in the stillness.

I'm surprised at how familiar it smells; surely if it had only been built this year it would not smell so musty, but of newly cut wood and fresh paint? This is so exciting, I will be able to see for myself how they decorate the house, how they live. But where is the stained glass window?

Seeing nothing, a void where it should be, I realize that something might, in fact, be wrong. It's not my house of 2020, but neither is it what it should have been in 1935. I switch on the central light which illuminates the art deco entrance hall, expecting to see marble and chrome and stained

glass and all those knick-knacks I'd seen from the outside, but the room is walled up with wooden panels. Gone is the galleon, gone are the frogs.

I turn around, trying to work out where exactly I am; if I'm in neither 1935 nor 2020. I hear a dry fluttering above my head, and as I look up something glances painfully off my eye socket. My eyes are stung by a whiplash of pink and start watering; I try to rest them by looking down, and I see that a blurry shape is coming towards me out of the recess of the study, scampering jerkily across the marble floor. It's a simplified, colourful chair, with taut marionette strings extending back into the darkness. It's opening and closing itself, flapping excitedly, and it moves like a manic baby who can't walk yet, shuffling along on its backside. It's enough like a demented candy-striped spider to send me racing up the staircase to the bedroom in a panic. As I mount those familiar solid stairs, I see through the tears that more puppet creatures of different sizes and shapes are swooping and chittering around the light, their shadows flitting against the walls as the light swings around wildly. A multicoloured kite-like shape lunges at me from behind and I feel a dull smack, like with a bolster or cushion, against the back of my shoulders. I run.

Once inside the bedroom I slam the door behind me, my heart galloping. I switch on the light and see, as my vision returns to normal, that this room is also boarded up with wooden panels. The master bed is still there, with a rumpled and stained candlewick bedspread bunched in its center. Behind me, on the other side of the door there's flapping and chittering, now with little pixie screeches interspersed. Taping, scraping, and thumping.

From the crumpled pile on the bed, a geometric puppet shelving unit rises wobbly. It has a doleful expression and a rounded belly. And a pair of my Uniqlo undies are tied around its neck. These move independently, controlled by their own set of marionette strings. They unfurl and wave sensuously, like a flag in slow motion. The tragicomic figure rises further from the bed to the height of the stained glass windows. These can be seen because there are rectangles roughly hacked out of the wooden panels to reveal them. The glasses are dulled by the lack of back illumination; their surfaces are more like tooled leather. On the left there is Saint Camillus, the patron saint of doctors, bending his wan face towards his ward of gray patients. On the right is Saint Marguerite, the patron saint of childbirth. She offers her crucifix to a dragon as if she expects him to lick it like an ice cream cone.

The puppet is hovering, moving closer and closer to me across the room. I smile and come to meet it, finger the strings, feel their tautness. I hitch up my tweed skirt as I clamber on to the bed. I can feel the presence that is masterfully manipulating the puppet strings. Manipulating them to express just the right amount of pathos.