

Georgi Gospodinov

D.J.

(An excerpt)

A few words about D.J.

Don Juan is a literary myth rather than a literary character, which accounts for his reproductive ability, his capacity to reappear in various places and times. Beyond his artistic incarnations, Don Juan has become a byname, a stock character within our stock culture, a paramour, a soap opera, a part of our collective imagination: the cloak, the sword, the mask. Or perhaps his thin mustache, his burning cigar, his sleek, shiny hair, the sparkle in his eye – a sort of a movie star from the 1940s or 50s.

Thus, “Don Juan” successfully climbed to the top of the charts in the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Four centuries’ hit. Needless to say, no scratch comes from scratch; the DJ can mix only well-known, popular vinyls.

In other words: this mix relates to the original *Don Juan* as the tangamento to the tango, as the modern cigarette to the traditional pipe. The smoke is similar, but the feel, the groove, the beat is different.

If I may say so, this is a light play with low tar and nicotine content.

A Short History of Tobacco

Prehistory

In 1492 Christopher Columbus discovered the island of San Salvador and... tobacco. He described the latter as “some kind of dry leaves”, which the natives presented to him as a gift, and which were eventually thrown overboard (first the leaves, then the natives). During the same year and some months later (in November) a person by the name of Rodrigo de Jerez became the first European to witness and record the ritual of smoking. He wrote that the natives (where else but in Cuba?) rolled the dried tobacco inside palm or corn leaves until it took the form of “something like a musket made out of paper”, after which they lighted it from one end and “drank the smoke” from the other. Soon Jerez became the first inveterate smoker out of the Americas. He brought the habit to his hometown, but the smoke coming out of his mouth and nostrils terrified his neighbors so much that he was handed over to the Holy Inquisition. When he was released from prison seven years later, smoking had already turned into the new Spanish craze.

History

1600 – The seventeenth century began with Sir Walter Raleigh convincing Queen Elizabeth to give smoking a try.

1604 – King James I wrote “Counterblast to Tobacco” and raised the import tax on tobacco by 4000%.

1613 – The first Romanovs banned tobacco in Russia. By the 1670s the ban was lifted.

1614 – The Spanish King Phillip III turned Seville into the tobacco capital of the world. To retain control of the market, he ordered that all tobacco coming from the Spanish colonies must be shipped to Seville first.

1619 – Tirso de Molina wrote *The Love Rogue*. It was the first time Don Juan appeared on stage.

1642 – Pope Urban VIII is compelled to issue a bull prohibiting all smoking during church services in Seville.

1665 – Moliere’s *Don Juan or The Stone Guest* premiered at the Palais Royal. The author (in the role of Sganarelle) opened the play with the famous tobacco soliloquy.

D.J.

A play by Georgi Gospodinov

Translated from the Bulgarian by Dimiter Kenarov

Actors playing actors and also

Donna Anna

Joker (director; manager of the company)

Sganarelle

The Stone Guest

Elvire

Don Juan (D.J.)

I. The Booth of Vice

Cool, electronic sound for transition; the place is cold and aseptic.

Voice: You have a customer in booth number five.

Anna (Dona Anna): *(Enters the booth, picks up the phone.)* Hello, hello...

Voice: *(Voiceover like)* Welcome to the legal booth of vice. You have already used nine credits. You have one credit remaining. Please, choose from the following options: cigarettes, peep show, sexually explicit photographs, politically incorrect language...

Anna: One cigarette, please. *(There is a click and a cigarette comes out of the machine.)*

Voice: I'm transferring you to your personal DJ-therapist, as required by the Department of Total Happiness and Inner Control. We would like to remind you that you need to follow all instructions given. Please, stay on the line.

(A click and the mechanical voice disappears.)

D.J.: *(Mechanical voice again, but a shade friendlier, a bit tired maybe.)* Hello. I am your personal DJ-therapist. I suppose this is our last conference.

Anna: If two voices could confer...

D.J.: And your last cigarette. It's quite unusual that you exchanged all your credits for cigarettes. There are other worthwhile vices, you know. Don't you have a fondness for men?

Anna: You can't have everything for ten credits. Plus, you don't offer men, do you? I prefer to stay in my cloud of smoke. Smoking is more than just lighting a cigarette.

(Pause.) Was more... By the way, are there any legal passions left?

D.J.: You must be aware that all passions are detrimental to the individual as well as to society...

Anna: Please... This is my last cigarette and I just wanted to chat.

D.J.: Passion is a relative term. You could passionately pursue a cholesterol-free, no cellulite, stress-free life...

Anna: Death can be its own kind of passion, aging...

D.J.: We need to avoid these topics or we could be disconnected.

Anna: Fine, fine... Do you know that all men I've had were smokers? It was natural then. I remember the smoke from our cigarettes rising, mingling. As if the cigarettes were having a conversation of their own, something like an affair, and we just followed their smoke... Ever since we started living in a smoke-free environment, it seems that romance has also vanished away like smoke. Do you know that poem: "Like a smoker among non-smokers / Like a lover among non-lovers..." Have you heard it?... Hello?

D.J.: No, I haven't. I must facilitate your cultural adjustment. You don't have any more credits...

Anna: Forget it. It's not worth the bother in this fuck... *(Is about to say "fucking" but catches herself.)* world without taste, without smell, without color, without smoke... I think I've failed you as a therapist. I'm terribly sorry...

D.J.: You mustn't use the word "fail"

Anna: Can I say at least that you have a pleasant voice...

D.J.: Pardon?

Anna: I mean, I got used to your voice, so to speak. It was nice to banter with you while I had those nine cigarettes. You remind me of the past, when the smoke was mingling...

D.J.: We have to change the topic.

Anna: Do you have a body?

(Silence.)

Anna: You are not some kind of mechanical therapist, automated service, are you? You're not just a voice, are you...

D.J.: Time is running out.

Anna: Is it possible to see each other somewhere else? Out of this booth, out of... Are you... *(The mechanical voice comes back in: "Your time is up. You have used all of your ten "vice" credits. Now you are ready to be integrated into our brave new world. The Department of Total Happiness and Inner Control wishes you a happy life.")*

There is a click, as of someone hanging up; dialing tone. She exits the booth, sighs. We hear the steps of another woman approaching. We'll call her Joker.

Joker: "It's cigarettes today and sex tomorrow... in three or four years they could ban smiling to strangers." It was your last credit, wasn't it? Let's have a cig.

Anna: You have one?

Joker: Imaginary. A made-up cigarette. They haven't banned these yet. Here, have one. *(Someone strikes a match.)*

Joker: I prefer matches. I stare at the flame until it burns my fingers. *(She exhales.)*

Anna: *(Strikes a match.)* Thanks. What kind are they?

Joker: Your call. I call them D.J. My favorite. *(Anna starts to cough.)* Careful, they're strong. It's been some time since I spent my final credit. But I keep on coming back here

and you know why?... Because this sinful slum is the only spot left on this planet, where I can still find normal, miserable, down-and-out people. You won't see them anywhere else.

Anna: *(To herself, as she "puffs")* It was the last credit. His voice... somewhat tired and blue... As if we'd had a smoke together sometime long ago... *(Imitates with irritation.)* "You have used your last credit... to integrate... in this world." Go fuck yourself in your clean, happy a...

(Brrrrrrrr – an alarm goes off and we hear a recorded message)

Voice: You have used illegitimate language. You will incur a fine upon a second violation.

Joker: Come on, gal, there're bugs everywhere here. Let's cuss together. Same as the cigarettes.

Together: *(Quietly, whispering.)* Go fuck yourself in your clean, happy ass.

(They sigh in relief. The bugs can't detect them. The act befriends them.)

Joker: You want to come along with me? We are a company of actors. Unemployed, of course. As you probably know, theater was outlawed. The Department ruled that acting corrupts this cheerful, sturdy world. In the old plays everyone smokes and blasphemes. Death, adultery, disgrace. But we keep on meeting in secret. Come, come now...

Steps. A song comes through. They are in a car.

Anna: I have this dream of dying in a backyard, among hemlock and nettle, leaning against a sun-drenched wall with a pack of cheap cigarettes in my hand. Taking in the smoke and everything that meets the eye... There's nothing you can't stomach with a bit of smoke. I want to feel it moving down my lungs, engraving the white tissue with nicotine anagrams. And then, moving up, worn out and bluish.

Elvire: It's otherworldly, to die like this.

Anna: To die like this, puffing away cigarette after cigarette in a run-down backyard, where, some day, people will find nothing but ashes.

All of them, together: Nothing else?

Anna: Nothing else. Nothing they could hold to: no body, no shriveled lungs, no yellowed teeth. Just ashes. And if you have mastered your craft, there won't be even ashes left. Just... smoke... And one day he just calls your number. Comes out of somewhere... throws a spell on the world around you, makes it different, different because of him. And then he leaves. Like that. Like... God. When he showed up a year ago, it was the first time I took notice of the seasons in this city. I saw that the Fall is more than rain and fog, raincoats and umbrellas, handkerchiefs, stomachaches. Well, the world stayed different only that Fall, the beginning of that Fall. Then he called again. On the phone. He wouldn't even see me again. He was scared. (*Change of voice.*) "Too perfect... it's better to quit now... leave it the way it is. Let's skip all that follows: the bickering, the dripping tap, the bad breath in the morning, the soiled underwear of marriage." That's what he called it – the underwear of marriage. On the phone. I hate phones. What was he doing while he was on the phone, telling me all this. Did he hide in some nook in the hallway, while his wife was watching TV (I don't even know if he had a wife)... Bullshit! It was a premeditated, cold-blooded murder... The magician was gone. In the middle of the trick. A woman was bleeding onstage, hacked in two, and no one willing to collect the parts. No one... and then... I can't remember. It's been a whole year since then, and no recollections, no seasons. Well, yes, I did smoke. I smoked my brains out. I felt that if someone pulled the fag out of hand, I'd fall apart. I wanted to smoke up everything around me. To roll all the shit into a cigarette, light it, and suck it in. It seems that the world found out about my plans, got scared, and banned smoking. And so I came to the booth of vice... He had a strange voice, almost...

Joker: To dump you just when the world was about to turn. He is...

Anna: Are we there?

Joker: We're there.

Elevator sound

Steps

Sganarelle: We've got an audience; we've got an audience...

The Stone Guest: An audience of one; but then, it's better than no audience at all.

Joker: How's the gang?

The Stone Guest: If you're asking about the gangrene of the gang, it's fine. Just a bit putrid and foul smelling because of Sganarelle's feet.

Joker: (*To Anna.*) *Don Juan* was our last performance. We can't get over it.

Elvire: (*Reports with irony.*) AA – Actors Anonymous – is lined up for the evening rehearsal...

The Stone Guest: "The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or poem unlimited: Seneca cannot be too heavy nor Plautus too light. For the law of writ and the liberty, these are the only men."

Sganarelle: "Oh dear, you talk so sweetly! You talk as if you've learned it all by heart, as if you've read it in a book."

The Stone Guest: Please, Sganarelle, play Sganarelle only in the play. Don't act dumb. Step aside, step out of your character... It would be helpful to read the whole of *Hamlet* some day. Act II, Scene 2, Polonius greets the actors...

Joker: AA – Actors Anonymous – is lined up for the evening rehearsal...

The Stone Guest: Sganarelle's dream is to play Hamlet and that's why he's learned only his parts. But if you ask me, he'll end up playing Rosencrantz. Or Guildenstern at best; it would be the crown of his career.

Sganarelle: I simply quoted Moliere. *Don Juan*, Act II, Sganarelle's part.

Joker: Enough! Stop it! (*To Donna Anna.*) A jobless actor is worse than an idle soldier. He's full of nonsense. But he wants to act so much, he can't tell black from white. They saw you coming here and abandoned everything else. Give them an audience large enough and a stage to stand, and they shall move the world. They're ready to skip between plays as... as... (*someone gives a cue:* postmodernists), to mix them as... (*another cue:* DJs), only that you may stay for an hour and half. Let me introduce them to you, though they did it already for themselves. Here's Sganarelle; he dreams of playing Hamlet, but for now he's stuck with Leporello.

Sganarelle: At your service, madam. By birth, I'm Prince of Denmark, by fate – a French servant.

Joker: This is the faithful Elvire, as well as Charlotte, Maturine and other dames, depending on the night.

Elvire: I am whoever you wish.

Joker: This is the Commodore, The Statue, also known as The Stone Guest.

The Stone Guest: *(With a stony voice.)* You want to shake hands?

Joker: Don't do that, else you'll burn in Hell... I'm kidding, of course. Because his memory is made of stone, he knows our repertoire by heart, and often plays the prompter. The Statue is a good disguise. So there.

Anna: And your part?

Joker: I play director, manager and author. And all the extras. That is why they call me Joker.

Anna: What about Don Juan?

Joker: He left us. Now he labors at the booth of vice, preaches virtue on the phone, and uses his initials only. He may be gigolo or pimp by night. He used to do it well... We miss him, certainly. But how do you keep a man like him, when every woman up to now has failed in this endeavor.

Sganarelle: *(Thinks it's a good place to join in and to quote Hamlet.)* Frailty, thy name is Juan. Well, we also know some other things about him which we'll tell you later on.

Joker: **(Sternly)** Shut up Sganarelle! *(change of tone; to Anna)* And you?

Anna: My name is Anna.

All of them, together: Donna Anna?!

Joker: Guys, today Donna Anna smoked her final credit.

Sganarelle: We're playing then.

Joker: Today Donna Anna smoked her final credit.

The Stone Guest: *DJ or the Pleasure of Smoking.* After Moliere.

Sganarelle: *(With eagerness)* "Aristotle and the philosophers can say what they like, but there's nothing to equal tobacco: it's an honest man's habit, and anyone who can get on without it doesn't deserve to be living at all: it not only clears and enlivens the brain, it's conducive to virtue:... *(Forgets his line; waits for Stone Guest's cue, who whispers: ... a fellow learns from taking)* a fellow learns from taking it how to comport himself

decently. Haven't you noticed how, once a chap starts taking snuff, he behaves politely to everybody, and what a pleasure he takes in offering it right and left wherever he happens to be? He doesn't even wait to be asked or until folk know that they want it! Which just goes to show how it makes for honest and decent behavior in all those who take it....”

Anna: It's odd I never dwelt much on this soliloquy.

The Stone Guest: Not an accidental speech. In the beginning of the sixteen hundreds, King Phillip the Second turned Seville into the tobacco center of the world. Tobacco leaves from the Spanish colonies were carried there first. Plumes of smoke were rising from Seville, a true Gomorra of tobacco. It was the reason why, thirty years later, Pope Urban VIII issued a bull prohibiting all smoking during Sunday service. Something else: the sixteen hundreds marked the heyday of the pipe, which spelled permanence, stability, and matrimonial bliss – for the pipe is nothing else, but a tranquil, cozy hearth in miniature. It was then our man appeared who swapped his women like cigars. Don Juan was perhaps the first aficionado of cigars in a world of pipes. This, namely, was his tragedy – his dramatic contradiction with the times. What say you, Sganarelle?

Sganarelle: “By God, I say... I don't know what to say. You turn the tables so, that right you seem, yet...”

The Stone Guest: And to conclude my story according to the rules of noble rhetoric (I admit I have prepared this aphorism in advance): The world's history is writ in smoke. A case in point, if you'll allow. Some say that high import taxes on tobacco set off the Revolution in good old France. The French peasants enjoyed their cigarito because they wished to snub their snuffing aristocracy.

Jokes: Splendid research, Commodore. Very good! Bravo!

Elvire: And that bit about history being writ in smoke was so eloquent. In praise of tobacco....

The Stone Guest: In praise of passion, dear Elvire.

Joker: Or in praise of death, dear Guest. Sometimes I dream of my death. I'm laid in a large, long cigarette. I'm buried under finely chopped tobacco...

Everybody: Oh, such fragrance...

Joker: Such fragrance. It makes me dizzy. In that dream everything is soft and quiet. Then the lips of one very beautiful and sad woman take me in.

Everybody: Mmmmm....

Joker: Beautiful women are always sad. Soft, warm lips.

Anna: There's something I can't stand – lipstick on the filter.

Joker: No lipstick. I shout from inside the cigarette. “No lipstick, please. This is my only wish.” While she, lipstick on, lights the cigarette and takes a drag, deep and slow, and sucks me in.

Everybody: Deep and slow.

Joker: The smoke wraps round my body. I feel warmth and I'm lulled to sleep. When the fiery ember reaches me, there's a sizzle, a short crackle (crack!)...

Everyone cowers

Joker: ... and that's it. From now on I'll be just smoke inhaled by this one woman. I pass through her lips, I go down her throat, and I sink in the transparent urn of her lungs. A nicotine dot. This is the death I dream of... the death I dream of.

Telephone effect

Phone ringing. The actors fall silent. The phone keeps on ringing.

Elvire: *(quietly)* The phone...

Joker: *(slight panic, but tries to remain calm)* We're not here... We're in the sixteen hundreds. The telephone hasn't been invented yet.

Sganarelle: It's probably because of all the cigarettes and dying. They won't allow such talk...

Joker: Don't worry. We're not here...

(to be continued)