



I OVERLOOK
YOUR BIZARRE
OBSESSION
WITH PEEING.

LOVE LETTER photography and words by ANGELA DANSBY to **BRUSSELS**

*QUIRKY,
CULTURED CITY:
BE MINE*

Dear Brussels,

You had me at “Bonjour, enchanté” when we first met three years ago. I fell then for your charming personality, international flair, and striking appearance. Often overshadowed by your bigger siblings Paris and London, you have so much to offer yet remain an underexplored gem. That’s because you’re modest and understated, only capturing the hearts of those who take the time to know you. Here’s why I love you:

Heart of Gold ~ Your Grand Place is a UNESCO World Heritage site that was once the hub of trade, where rich merchants lived. Today visitors gawk at the former guild houses—some of which are even gilded.

Your City Hall, with its tall spire in the Grand Place, represents your eccentric self with two different wings, each designed by different architects working some 50 years apart. While visually compatible, the two sides are not at all symmetrical, just like you, Brussels.

Your Royal Palace is divine and unique, complete with a room marked by iridescent green ceilings and chandeliers covered with Thai jewel beetles from the Congo. Since the Belgian king and queen don’t live there, you’ve opened the street in front of the palace for hosting public parties. The remains of the old Coudenberg palace from three centuries ago lie quietly underneath your modern bones.

Your Cinquantenaire Park Arch, recognizing Belgium’s 1830 independence from the Netherlands, makes Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate seem small by comparison. And what a romantic view you offer on top.

Worldliness ~ You are the second-most cosmopolitan city in the world after Dubai, representing 180 nationalities. European institutions alone account for one-tenth of your population; no wonder around 60 percent of your inhabitants were born outside of Belgium.

Your competing French and Dutch influences (Wallonia and Flanders) make you more cultured and compelling. Nice that your street signs and other public materials are in both languages, even though you’re dominated by the French language of love.

You handle your six governments (federal, Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels Capital Region, and French- and German-speaking communities) earnestly, but I know you’re actually laid-back, never letting rules interfere with the joy of living.

Great Sense of Humor ~ Your rarified sense of humor is inspired by a legendary comic culture. Kudos that you have the Belgian Comic Strip Center (housed in a former warehouse designed by famed Belgian architect Victor Horta), as well as 37 commissioned murals along your city’s Comic Book Route. I appreciate that you’ve played home to famous artists like Hergé and Peyo, who created Tintin and the Smurfs, respectively.

Quirky ~ You’re quirky as all get out with giant puppets wandering around public events, a Street Light Museum, and a fantastical winter merry-go-round. Your hidden sculpture *Human Passions* shocked the public when it was unveiled in 1896. Depicting humanity’s pleasures and sins, including seduction, murder, suicide, rape, and death, the sculpture was locked up for over a century. But as you’ve observed, times and tastes change, so now *Human Passions* is available a few hours a week for viewing.



I overlook your bizarre obsession with peeing, demonstrated by the statues of the sculptures Manneken Pis, Jeanneke Pis, and Het Zinneke (little boy, little girl, and big dog peeing). Why the two-foot-high Manneken Pis is your symbol is beyond words. But your people love it, so much so that it has been stolen seven times and cycles through almost a thousand costumes.

Physically Attractive ~ You have fantastic physical attributes as a Dutch-French mix. Victor Horta's Hotel Solvay, his eponymous museum (the architect's former home and studio), as well as Paul Hankar's Maison Ciamberlani are all shining examples of Art Nouveau, the style born in Belgium. I just love your Old England building (now the Musical Instruments Museum) with its glass, wrought iron, and great view from its rooftop restaurant.

Your physical beauty runs deep, going back to the 12th and 14th centuries with the Crosly Bowling tower and Halle Gate, leftovers from the first and second defensive walls that once enclosed you. Your Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula, which took a mere 300 years to complete, is Gothic gorgeous.

But you've kept up with the times as well, showing off modern architecture in the European Parliament and Commission as well as the brand-new European Council building with its Frank Lloyd Wright-esque exterior and giant, bulbous structure inside. Your Basilica of the Sacred Heart is the epitome of Art Deco. The Atomium, designed for Expo 58 to represent an atom magnified billions of times, is a unique city symbol. The night lights of its giant orbs are serenely romantic.

You also have many fine interiors, including boutique hotels such as Made in Louise, Manos Premier, Odette en Ville, and The Dominican.

Outdoorsy ~ You have lots of lovely green space, including many secret parks that stay lush thanks to your plentiful rain. Bois de la Cambre forest is an urban oasis with its running and biking trails, small lake for canoeing, and island restaurant, Chalet Robinson. It's charming to take a mechanical ferry across the lake to reach the restaurant. The green space surrounding the lake is perfect for a picnic, as is Tenbosch Park, L'Abbaye de la Cambre, and Ixelles Ponds.

Egmont Park, and the mysterious Egmont Palace and Leopold Park behind the European Parliament, are wonderful places to linger. And Mont des Arts has one of the most beautiful gardens in the city. Your nearby Royal Library of Belgium offers great views of the garden and City Hall from its rooftop cafeteria.

Around eight thousand green parakeets live in many of your trees, thanks to a local zoo owner who released 50 in 1974 to give your neighborhoods more color.

Knowledgeable ~ With over one hundred museums, you are chock-full of information. No wonder you're Europe's capital and home to the Parliamentarium—covering all political aspects of the European Union—and new House of European History.

Artistic ~ You must have more art installations than gas stations. My favorites are the René Magritte Museum (he pioneered surrealism in your care after all), La Bourse (a stock exchange turned art gallery), La Photographie Galerie, and Xavier Hufkens. You attract several international art shows each year, such as BRAFA, Art Brussels, and the Affordable Art Fair.

Sensibly Fashionable ~ You prove that fashion forwardness is not limited to big cities. In spite of housing only 1.2 million people, fashion statements are made all the time on Rue Dansaert, Rue des Chartreux, and Avenue Louise. Stores like Caroline Biss, Natan, Essential, and Y Dress demonstrate that Belgians know how to design clothing—cases in point: designers Dries Van Noten, Diane Von Furstenberg, and Liz Claiborne.

I love shopping for Italian leather gloves in your Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert—the oldest mall in the world that once housed one of the first cinemas and the first chocolatier (Neuhaus) in Belgium.

I appreciate that you treasure old things, too, like antiques and second-hand items sold in and around your daily Jeu de Balle flea market and on Rue Haute.

Foodie ~ When it comes to cooking, you are second to no city. You have top chefs, restaurants, and produce (there's a reason Brussels sprouts were named after you), as well as the world's best beer, waffles, mussels, fries, gingerbread (speculoos), and chocolate.

The Tram Experience—a multi-course, gourmet meal prepared on a tram that moves throughout the city by a cadre of famed Belgian chefs—is one of a kind. And your seasonal food festivals like Taste of Brussels in September and Food Truck Festival (the largest in Europe) in May are too tasty and fun.

You feature diverse cuisines. Some of my favorite dishes and moments can be found in La Canne en Ville, Fin de Siecle, La Meilleure Jeunesse, Le Wine Bar Sablon des Marolles, Osteria Romana, Cowfish, La Paix, MiTo, Dolce Amaro, Le Berger, La Fabrique en Ville.

I salivate over your 500 chocolate brands, though my favorites are Pierre Marcolini (his displays alone are works of art), Frederic Blondeel, Wittamer, Mary, and Zaabar. I love that I can find freshly made waffles everywhere, or that they find me via a musical truck roaming your streets. Galler's molten-chocolate-filled waffles are always worth an indulgence. And the speculoos at Maison Dandoy never disappoints.

Quality Drinker ~ You are a beer connoisseur, offering the world the best. This includes six of the 11 Trappist monastery breweries in the world, such as the cult Westvleteren and about two hundred others. You even have your own Cantillon Brewery and Brussels Museum of the Gueuze to showcase this carbonated, acidic beer made only in Belgium. Your so-called "Brussels champagne" does not need French validation. My favorite places to learn about Belgian beers are Poechenellekelder, with 150 options (and puppets for decoration), underground Delirium, with more than two thousand beers, and your annual beer fest in the Grand Place.

I'm happy to see that you've jumped onto the craft cocktail bandwagon with venues such as the secret bar Jalousy (weekly password available from smokers outside), Vertigo, Alice, and La Pharmacie Anglaise. Your new Residence Palace rooftop (the best terrace in Brussels) serves cocktails with a view, if only on select summer nights through September 15.

Social Butterfly ~ You have a lot going on, hosting 20,000 events a year. Every night of the week you offer fun dates, such as year-round outdoor markets in front of the architecturally stunning Commune de Saint-Gilles (Mondays) and in the fashionable Place du Chatelain (Wednesdays). I love our Sundays with oysters and champagne at Place Flagey or authentic Moroccan wraps and mint tea at Gare du Midi market. And Thursdays are intriguing, rubbing shoulders with European bureaucrats at Place Luxembourg, followed by dancing at your elegant nightclub in the forest, Jeux d'Hiver.

Finally, I love our special days together at the Ommegang folk festival, and our afternoons sunning on the "beach" along your canal. You spoil me during the Belgian Independence Day parade, the Grand Place Flower Carpet, the Christmas market with sound and light shows, and numerous music festivals and gala balls.

Brussels, what else can I say? My heart will stay with you forever.

XOXO, Angela ●



**YOU HAVE
MORE ART
INSTALLATIONS
THAN GAS
STATIONS.**