

BRUSSEGEM,
a snug hell

ONE

1.

A word about Brussegem: look hard at a detailed map of the small European country of Belgium and you may, with perseverance, find the faint dot of the village of Brussegem. It's a prosaic village, where hardworking peasants reap and sow food and fodder year after year on their little pitted patches of land. It's a fairly safe place to live—all is calm and decent—little crime, little litter, little anything.

In Brussegem, they still ride in wooden wagons pulled by broad-chested horses, and they lead cows through the streets with rope harnesses. The streets still have the same lumpy cobblestones of years gone by. There's an ancient, crumbling mishmash of a church in the center of the village, where, over the warring ages, passing conquerors have stopped briefly to stick a Kilroy-was-here brick in the façade before moving on. The right wing of the church is Romanesque, the left wing Germanic, the steeple Scandinavian—the live bird perched upon it Brussegemish—and the whole thing a bore. Nothing any culture vulture tourist need bother about.

So ... tidy, snug Brussegem—a quiet place—a benign place—a place that keeps up, day after day, its small promise of being, and forever remaining, a faint dot on the map.

Just on the outskirts of this dot lived an American painter—secluded,

aloof, an odd part of this unhurried heaven. Also odd, his name was just like the village's: Brussegem. And he possessed as bumpy a disposition as any cobblestoned street in the village: a moody man with gray hair, a full beard, and beady eyes. Children irritated him, he disliked fluffy animals, and hated sounds that kept him awake at night. Neither was he very fond of taking walks, but take them he did; for between finishing one painting and beginning another, there was not all that much to do in this little corner of the world, save walk.

There weren't many rich treasures left in the village to amuse or divert him while on his strolls. He knew the village of Brussegem like the back of his hand, and, taken altogether, most of the wondrous places in it could fit snugly over a single knuckle. Leaving his house, turning left, he would tuck his chin into his chest, clasp his hands behind his back, and impatiently promenade. Rarely did he look up, knowing, from the familiar cobblestones passing by his feet, where he was and what was where: the local brewery on the left, then the church on his right, the mayor's house, the vegetable shop, and endless cobblestones on ahead. The local peasants looked upon him with placid curiosity, making terse observations among themselves, considering him a sullen, quick-walking foreigner who refused to say a normal "good day."

Long ago, this painter Brussegem had hung the dark mantle of "Outcast Artist" over his shoulders—and over his life, he formed a strict philosophy—Art and Only Art—and protected his solitude and artistry with all his moody might, keeping humankind at bay and eliminating softer feelings and all frivolous affections. Over time, this philosophic precept made ordinary human contact a laborious ordeal. He rarely attended social gatherings, rarely wrote letters, rarely anything at all. But. He did allow himself the refined gentleman's indulgence of having a mistress, which he came to consider as a small, forgivable philosophical defect.

He would start for her apartment toward sundown. It was an hour's walk through the surrounding countryside, with its narrow paths and leafy ways, even a babbling brook and a scampering squirrel here and there, till he arrived, slightly damp with perspiration, at the next, larger village. She

was home.

His preliminary wooing was always gentlemanly—"Lovely eyes—sensual lips"—then, unclad and a little more savage, came fifteen vigorous masculine minutes of puffing and lovemaking—half-smothered squeals—squirmings—snorted prayers—"God!"—as his shanks shivered and his pleasure poured. Following this, he enjoyed a five-minute hum of pure gratification and a slow re-gathering of his masculine resources.

"Brussegem? It's always the same with you. I'm bored. I don't want to see you again."

He looked over at her face that stared at the ceiling. He wanted to say something, but he was not certain what.

So he said: "I have no idea why you say this."

Slowly, she turned her head to have a slow look at him over there: hair a wild mess, eyes heavy-lidded in satisfaction.

"Yes. You have no idea. Same old, same old, Brussegem. Time after time. Clarity?"

"None."

"That's okay. Goodbye now. There's a door to this bedroom, there's a door to this house. Please use them. I have a life to get on with."

Upon arriving home, a little weary, drained, his masculine resources utterly un-gathered, Brussegem scraped his shoes very carefully upon his coconut doormat for a full thirty seconds: an old habit. He hung his coat on a peg just inside the front door. He shuffled around the house, switching on lights to keep out the evening. He performed some homey bachelor chores; sweeping the stairs and tidying up a few splayed periodicals and newspapers in the living room. In the kitchen, he rinsed a dish, a bowl, a fork, a knife, and a spoon. Then he froze, hearing a faint, well-known buzz. He looked up at the windowpane above the sink. There squatted a fat, full, naked, and grotesque mosquito. With a soundless movement, he picked up a cloth, bunched it up, and swiftly reached up and squashed the insect against the windowpane. He moved the rag in a circular motion, pressing, making sure. He believed killing mosquitoes was Good; every time he executed one he felt as though he had performed a worthwhile, satisfying

deed. Mosquitoes were, aesthetically speaking, a completely useless insect. He removed the rag to view the remains: a small moist smudge: a lone, wiry leg remained pasted on the windowpane. He smiled. He wiped the window clean, and then wiped the window sill. He looked out the window into the night. His smile dimmed. His lips moved thoughtfully, considering other matters.

"Women," he philosophized.

Later, getting comfortable, he settled in a living room chair with his favorite pipe tucked between his lips; he switched on a lamp and spread a book open upon his lap. He looked with contentment about his bare living room, prettied only by his geometrical paintings. There was no stirring of life beside him. He was proud of not keeping a dog, or cat, or any sort of furry companion that would supposedly assuage his lonesome solitude—no, no meowing cat to feed and let endlessly in and out, nor any nervous dog to say shut-up to when it barked at creaks and inconsequential bumps in the darkness ... no. Sighing peacefully, he bent his head above the book and began to read....

Soon, his mind was in a restful, groggy state. He got up and went about the house switching off the lights one by one. In his bedroom, he lay his pipe aside and quietly tucked himself into bed. And as the pipe smoldered to a stop on his night table and his heavy head sunk deeper into his pillow, a last lulling thought drifted through his brain, a thought he'd long ago crystallized into a deep, lucid moment, a comforting thought: that life, ah life, was as good as any existence, until the real thing came along.

2.

Brussegem awoke late in the morning with a grunt, though with no muttering at all. He was determined not to let himself slide slowly into being some senile old man mumbling in lonely corners. He wished to remain a highly philosophical animal, even in the blur of semi-consciousness; and since his philosophy was mainly of a disenchanting sort—due to natural decay, daily frustrations, and the sad, all-pervading fleetingness of life—opening his eyes after a deep night of satisfying oblivion was not a rejuvenating joy: merely existence, once more....

So, with a single, highly rational grunt of disappointment, he awoke.

The first action he performed was to pad across to his bedroom window to see what type of day heaven had deemed to give him. He lived in a converted mill house that had the luxurious view of a slow creek winding leisurely below his own private hill of green grass and yellow, brown, blue flowers, fresh countryside rising and stretching up a long, wide slope and the sun was unexpectedly shining upon it all. Grudgingly pleased, he sniffed. He padded over to the front room to peer out the opposite window that faced the street. Now, discovering flaws, he went *mmm*. Across the way, a colony of limp, cast-off newspapers fluttered along the road, catching in the bushes. There were bits of trash among the blooming capuchins. He cogitated in sullen spirits: "Modern world - pollution - waste - indifference and dirt." Immeasurably lightened, he turned from the window and, sticking his arms into his slightly worn bathrobe, went to inspect the

day's mail.

As a morbid courtesy, death announcements were sent to all residents of Brussegem village whenever one of their worthy citizens kicked the ultimate bucket: and that was the only piece of post to be found in his mailbox this morning: a single, black-rimmed envelope. Out of idle curiosity, he opened it. Some local peasant, an Antoinette Verboven, had made it way into her eighty-eighth year. Brussegem quickly calculated; if he hung on that long, he'd have at least another twenty-five years coming to him. A lot of artistic ideals could be carefully accomplished in that time. Yet, he did not possess the robust constitution of a farming peasant. Their lives were all cauliflowers, leeks, and lettuce heads. Plant 'em, weed 'em, pluck 'em, bend, work, sweat of the brow; *they* had hardened tissue and healthy veins, whereas he was simply a sleepy-muscled artist, squishy and soft to the touch. Ah well, he fatalistically decided, death comes to us all.

He chucked the useless announcement away, unable to decipher the rest; it was printed in the local language, Flemish. He'd never been able, nor interested, to make out and master the various grunts of the native tongue. Once he'd studied a skinny book entitled *Flemish in Three Months* for over four years. He could say thank you (*Dank U*) and no thank you (*nee!*) but if he wanted to know the time, he'd use the international sign language of pointing at his watchless wrist and screwing up his face into a question mark.

He passed his current oil painting, which sat on an easel in his living room; he allowed it to catch his eye. He cocked his head and inspected it with his small, critical eyes. Without exception, his paintings were geometrical, bright-colored things: big flashbulbs of color with straight-backed stripes floating by on the canvas, or a triangle, frozen, in white space in an obscure spot on the far side of the canvas. Elsewhere, were two anonymous red, round spots, for some intangible reason, which seemed to be their explicit point. He had some eighty-five variations of this, kept upstairs in the attic, his official atelier, all dried, varnished, and unsold.... He had brought this latest painting down the stairs and into his living quarters in hopes of an artistic change of pace - and it had worked.

He could leisurely scrutinize it in passing, as now, and create and improve as he felt the urge; touch it up with a dab or two, fill in and fuss, making it *just so*—tucking in a corner, extending a mathematical meaning, underlining a bolt from the blue. He picked up a pencil to add a bit to the incomplete canvas: poised, he waited for inspiration.... Brussegem, in his paintings as in his life, wanted intensely to avoid the ultimate modern insult a critic could smack and stick him with: the accusation of "sentimentality." This included green forests, portraits of loved ones, still lifes—all sentimental. The term conjured up a vision of the artist as a castrated dog with big, moist eyes shivering on a barren windy street, tail tucked between hind legs, forlorn and feeling *sentimental*. Chilled by the vision, Brussegem drew a straight line across the canvas, reminding himself of his rational, geometrical pursuits. He began to smile, drawing another line, slanting it carefully at the end, following it off the canvas, exactly as though along a ruler, and the dog was dead.

Someone knocked at his front door: a loud, presumptuous thumping kept up for a good five seconds. This could only be a thick-headed peasant—or worse, someone of interest.

His inspiration interrupted, Brussegem laid his drawing pencil aside, taking his time. Though his hands were not too soiled, he wiped them carefully on an old spotted rag. The banging at the door began again. Disturbed, he dropped the rag and a little of his dignity, and pattered across the floor. He arrived just as the second round of knocking ceased; pausing a moment to tidy up his appearance into one of stately annoyance, he opened the door.

"Hello, Brussegem from Brussegem."

It was a fellow American, Yates, a pleasant, jokey fiction writer of thirty-five who thought Brussegem a most wonderful study of a colorful old relic from the lost days of purely artistic expatriates in Europe.

"Yates," Brussegem said dryly, faintly pleased, yet unwilling to show it. Brussegem had a strict principle: never encourage anyone to visit. Considering himself a serious artist, Brussegem could brook no haphazard interruptions in his daily routine. An artist had to have his habits; habit was

production, and any slight smile of gladness to an invading caller could bring down, he believed, mile-long lines of curious visitors wanting to turn snug Brussegem into a miniature Mecca. So, to Yates he grudgingly opened the door an extra inch, enough for the man to just squeeze through. This meant, metaphorically speaking, that, okay, you may enter this time, this once, but beware, do not, repeat do not, Yates, make an annoying habit of it.

Once within, Yates surveyed the living room while Brussegem shut the door. He spotted the backside of the canvas across the room; Yates hurried toward it, ready to behold.

"That is absolutely not ready for viewing," Brussegem sternly warned, seeing where Yates was headed.

"That's a never no mind. I'll be able to appreciate the finished product more fully, right?" Yates disappeared behind the canvas and halted before the geometrical colors and pencil sketchings. He studied. "I see," he finally commented. "Another self-portrait."

Brussegem, not pleased, turned away to do his rudimentary duties as a host: "Want coffee?"

"Delighted, you raging van Gogh."

Yates watched the rumpled bathrobe shuffle away into the kitchen, there to strike matches, brew coffee, get out cups and saucers. Alone, Yates turned to gaze out the windows at the flowers and grass of the back garden, the quiet creek, the three or four hopping birds in search of a bit of food. Yates could easily imagine ducks and swans in a pleasing lake, gliding by, picturesque and noble. He turned back to gaze at the canvas with its bright geometric shapes.

"Brussegem, why don't you take a gander out this back window some time and paint exactly what you see."

"I do paint exactly what I see," came Brussegem's voice from the kitchen.

"I dare you to put, amid all these circles and triangles and stabs and slabs, a doggie. A brown, floppy-eared doggie. Panting and happy. Sitting out there, by the lake."

Brussegem halted his rattling around in the cupboard—thinking, considering, recalling, straining. No, he was certain.

"But there's no lake out there."

"I know. But there could be—if you imagined it. That's called, you know, artistic license."

"If that's artistic license," Brussegem mumbled, "then yours should be revoked."

Pleased with his witticism, Brussegem chuckled softly and continued his search for an elusive coffee pot he had misplaced. He squatted and opened a cupboard below the sink. "Pot?" he questioned, and found an empty shelf with a single box of soap powder. He quickly yanked open the cupboard door on the left, as though he were trying to surprise the coffee pot before it playfully scampered away to hide from his eyes. "Pot!" he exclaimed, disappointed: "No pot. Where'd I put..." he opened another cupboard and peered deep within. "Need a flashlight." He caught himself, there, bent over with his head poked into a potless cupboard, mumbling to himself. He attempted to grin, as if to show he'd really meant to be talking to himself, as though it were an old private joke. "Mumble, mumble, mumble," he mocked himself, banishing any disturbing feelings of advancing senility.

Pulling his head from the cupboard, he straightened up, and with stiff dignity closed the cupboard doors one by one. He turned slowly around, now quite silently involved in remembering distinctly *where, where* that damned coffee pot could have gone. He blinked. There. There, right in the sink, unwashed, squatting, conspicuous, and not attempting to run away at all, the pot.

Feelings, overwhelming feelings, frightening feelings of premature senility, rushed upon him. He groaned softly, still staring at the obvious coffee pot.

Soon, the cups, rattling on saucers, were carried by Brussegem into the front room. Yates, who had moved the easel with the painting so as to

view it leisurely from the tattered sofa where he now sat, watched as the whole rattling affair was set on the coffee table before him and silenced.,

"Brussegem, how do you feel, I mean *actually* feel, after finishing one of these masterpieces?"

"Fine. I feel just fine." Brussegem disappeared again to fetch the coffee pot.

Actually, upon completion of these paintings, Brussegem felt mildly exhausted and somewhat pleased, yet more and more often he was left with a lingering sensation of nothing very specific. This nebulous emotion had been experienced enough times that he had philosophically concluded that it must be the elusive, artistic, eternal feeling of dissatisfaction; the searching and experimenting, the ultimate frustrations.... With the last dozen or so paintings, he had grown so used to these empty feelings, had become so detached, so very philosophical, that he now hardly felt anything at all.

"You haven't answered my question," Yates insisted when Brussegem returned from the kitchen. "*Just fine* tells me nothing. Tell me, really, define what this *art*," pointing a long, critical digit at the unfinished painting on the easel, "is all about. I haven't a clue."

"I hate defining my works," Brussegem explained, pouring the coffee. "I'd rather just paint them."

"Oh, I must remember that reply for my interviews when I'm rich and famous and madly sought after. It's a good one. But, just between us and the four walls, give us a real answer."

One thing Brussegem felt he could justifiably say about his work was, "You can see whatever you want in it." —though it seemed as though nowadays all would-be artists spouted this to hide their incompetence and sound artistic. But for Brussegem, for his singular artistry, it really was the truth. So he said it.

"You can see whatever you want in it."

Yates was silent for a full five seconds.

"For someone who prides himself on not being conventional, that's one hell of a fashionable sentence you just came out with. It puts the whole

burden of aesthetic failure and blame on the observer. So if someone doesn't understand or appreciate a painting—*get it*—why, it's not your fault, Mr. Lofty Artist, it's the poor old plebeian's, the old Philistine's fault. It's *his* lack of imagination, *his* inability to experience the profound wonders of the obscure masterwork.... 'Whatever he wants to see in it.' It's a cheap way of making us viewers of art reduced to muttering, 'Ah, I see what he means—I mean, I see what I mean.'

Brussegem considered the wordy barrage for a moment. Then concluded: "Milk? Sugar?"

"Just sugar."

Brussegem served two healthy spoonfuls of sugar into Yate's cup, then plopped the spoon in after, leaving it for Yates to stir at his leisure. He then went to his painting and turned it to the wall, away from Yates' eyes. Brussegem took a moment to study his canvas before saying,

"Anyway, if, as you say, these poor plebeians of yours are indeed covered by me and my supposedly obscure meanings and come to look with no critical faculties of their own, then they deserve my scorn, for they've proved themselves the Philistines I've always considered them."

Yates grunted. Brussegem returned and sat next to his visitor on the lumpy sofa.

"So how's life?" Yates stirred his coffee.

"Going along somewhat boringly, as usual. Don't you find life boring?"

"Only when I'm sleeping."

The comment went right by Brussegem, who was now concentrating on going down the long path of his own thoughts.

"I find life, in all, boring—or more precisely, monotonous." Brussegem slowly repeated the long syllables: "Mo-not-o-nous. Even the sound of the word exudes monotony." He paused and shifted his weight on the sofa. He believed that talking frankly, relentlessly, about the dull pain of existence was the truest expression of deep thoughts on the things that mattered in life; whereas trivial talk—the prices on the marketplace, how to spice a fancy dish, murmurs about the weather—were an unholy waste of

time, and not real life at all. Real life should always be intense and meaningful. Unfortunately, Brussegem found most of his life ordinary and repetitious. Every day, he calmly explained, was almost the same. Take the last few years of his life, roll them up in a big ball, and what would you have? One big round day....

"But, in any event, I still have my art, with which I've experimented, developed, and perfected with unremitting determination. I have only sold seven paintings to date, and at modest prices, which could bring us back to Philistines and plebeians. But, I manage to remain quite independent and lucid."

"And bored. Don't forget—monotonously bored. But hallelujah, you're working on another unsalable artistically ideal painting."

"And wasting my time on you," Brussegem said.

"You know," Yates confessed, "I don't think I could ever do what you're doing. Suppose it's admirable in a way. You squat out here in the provinces, honing intricate geometries; you calculate and go over and over, squirm and twist, as if creating were a new Chinese torture. For me, I just love writing too much to get pained hemorrhoids over every word I put down."

"Oh...." Brussegem looked way down into the dark depths of his coffee cup. "You believe in *just* writing?" This, in Brussegem's lexicon, in the equally dark depths of his artistic soul, was a most severe rebuke to the serious artist. Art was pain, travail, and sweat, every little step and inch of the way.

"Yeah, sometimes I just write. And even worse, I write advertising copy for ad agencies in Brussels. It's called making moola—keeping bread on the table."

Brussegem was not pleased. "A far cry from the truth, advertisements." He smacked his lips together twice, in double disdain.

"Oh," Yates drawled, "I wanted to tell the truth once, but I figured, who's going to believe it?"

"Yates, we're galaxies apart, we'll never understand one another," Brussegem placed the coffee things together neatly on the tray. "With a cup

of coffee and your conversation in me, I must now paint."

"Excuse me, was that a subtle hint on your part—as in 'leave'?"

"I believe this is the first time we've communicated since you've banged on my door."

Both men made small grins that stopped just short of being half-snarls. Yates, a polite guest, helped carry the dirty crockery into the kitchen.

"How's Lydia?"

"Who?"

"Lydia."

"Oh, her." Brussegem pushed the past away with a wave of his hand. "That ended ages ago. Yesterday, actually. Should've ended sooner. You ought to drop in more often if you want the latest news." Brussegem recollected his principles. "But not too often."

"Don't worry. I only came out here to invite you both over to my place for a little American fling, since you have no phone for phoning. Sorry about the break-up with Lydia."

"No pity, please. It did not affect me. Those things do not."

"Those things? You mean love?"

"If that's the word you wish to use. I would not."

"Don't you like loving women?"

"Please—women are an aesthetic experience." Brussegem's hands began carving feminine shapes in the air. "You must follow their curves and ways; rise up to a high, intense explosion, then recede, contented, fulfilled."

"Abstracting their soft flesh into an onanistic art work?"

"Once again, Yates, you refuse to follow the thought and remain in your own galaxy."

"Well, in any case, condescend to come to my galaxy for one night—you'll be my conversation piece. It's all for a good cause, a worthy, wondrous celebration. My birthday. I'm going to be thirty-six and dying. It's a funeral. Come, be happy."

"Possibly. Any free women attending?"

Yates gloated. "Why, you dirty, over-sexed, hot and bothered old beast."

"Me?" In his tattered, artistically splattered bathrobe, unshaven and stale, he was not exactly an example of sensuous manhood running wild in the Belgian countryside, as accused. He gazed down at his dry kneecaps exposed just beyond the frazzled hem of the robe. "Me?" he justifiably repeated.

Yates went to the front door. "Sure, you bloody elegant bohemian." He opened the door, stepped out, turned to give one last look. "The shebang, sir, is the last Saturday of this month—any time after eight. Come. Meanwhile, paint a sunset for me. I might buy." Yates shut the door after himself.

3.

Toward sundown, Brussegem went out for his walk, keeping his eyes upon his traveling shoes, watching familiar landmarks of cobblestones and gutters whisk by. Then he had a weak moment. Yates' last words rippled through his brain and he looked up: the approaching sunset glimmered between the buildings as he passed, flashes of colored light that seemed to invite him to enjoy its golden-streaked, fluffy-cloud adieu. He took a moment to turn the thought over in his mind before deciding to do what he had not done in a long while: attempt to be taken in by the great dimming orange eye of the setting sun.

Secret truth be told, he had always had a weak spot for sunsets, though usually he had found there were just too many things between him and the sun for full enjoyment. But with his memory providing minor hope, he walked clear of the middle of the village, taking many lefts and rights along the way. Leaving the last buildings behind, he walked up a sloping hill surrounded by cow pastures and farm fields. He halted at the crest; he had not glanced up as he'd walked, preferring to save all the charms and magic of the sunset till he was at the very best vantage point. When he arrived at the top of the hill, he halted, turned, and prepared. He looked up slowly, along the ground, over nearby trees, further.... The sun, and the rest. Of course, inevitably, there—a distant factory, its chimney puffing out fumes, ruining the pure effect; and automobiles, out of hearing, further away, moving along on some busy roadway like tiny humped dots right

across his vision of the sun. His eyes had no real chance of seeing just the sun. No, he would like a good sunset, but the modern civilized world, just a chimney or car of it, spoiled the experience.

He tucked his head back down, averted his eyes, his principles once more intact, and went along home.