

BRUSSEGEM,
a snug hell

TWO

4.

A further word about Brussegem. As time performed its main function—that is, as it passed—becoming, day-by-day, a week, two weeks, more—this solitary painter, stuck in the sticks, developed a carnal need for a simple, unburdening sexual affair. It had little to do with love. At sixty-two, Brussegem had a love-empty lifetime to look back upon, and be philosophical about. In his life, there was little need, desire, or want for the tedious daily demands of kisses, devotion, and intolerable everyday companionship that love implied. Had he been impotent, he might have had a fine, uneventful, untroubling artistic life for the rest of his whatever. Unfortunately, in this respect he was still robust. Other reliefs were unacceptable, such as dreamy, sneaky nocturnal pollutions—they were only semi-pleasurable, undependable in occurrence, and rather annoying in their sudden sticky surprise to be sufficiently gratifying. The other private solution, masturbation, was out; he had never bothered to acquire this skill during adolescence and saw no reason why he should begin to perfect the belittling act now. Finally, being far too proud to take an occasional bus into Brussels to spend his lust on a blasé prostitute, he instead resolved to make a few contacts out in the world in order to find a place his penis could call home.

Yates' party was thus convenient.

Yates' party turned out to be fifty or more people, mainly American-British cliques with bits and pieces of broken Belgian accents dispersed within the humming murmurs; they stood around with glasses in their hands, being subdued and semi-attentive to light conversation. Brussegem observed them with their glinting sociable smiles as they talked shop and sipped liquor.

Cigarette smoke was thick in the air; someone spilt a drink on the carpet and laughed; the initially subdued, polite talk gained in volume, becoming more of a constant, unpleasant din of strident voices scrambled together, as dense as the smoke. Pre-recorded music came constantly from somewhere.

Brussegem was increasingly displeased; the gathering was swiftly reminding him why he usually avoided such things. Every six months or so he would attend one of these social affairs, as the reality of them dimmed in his mind, simply to recall how horrible the experience was. Such gatherings replenished his aversion. It was much like witnessing another imperfect sunset, the world just did not work the way he wished. The earth, parties and all, should have been a quiet, un-agitated, reposeful place, a place built for musing and art, much like his atelier. Yet, here he found himself, much like any other silly smiling fool, attending a semi-happy gathering, when he could be painting, or sitting cozily, thinking, in his slippers at home.

He nearly departed straightway, yet he remained, his overpowering sexual appetite required it. He took a silent moment to curse the needs of his sexual equipment.

He found himself part of a group of four friendly males who showed no respect for following a line of thought to its logical conclusion. Indeed, subjects were good for maybe three or four short sentences, always quickly terminated with a joke. Their main interest lay in random joke telling. Brussegem glanced from face to face as each new joke was delivered, each following closely on the heels of the next. These rapid-fire jokes began stretching out in front of him like an endless desert, without the remotest

possibility of a refreshing oasis in the form of a critical observation or beautifully phrased witticism.

Just: "You know how you can tell who the morons are at an airport?" Pause. "They're the ones feeding bread to the airplanes!" And: "You know why an Irish mother doesn't let her child play in the sandbox? Because the cat keeps covering him up!" Three of the men exploded with glee, the other merely snickered, having heard the joke before, and Brussegem, realizing that he was expected to laugh and enjoy, snorted insincerely. It sounded as though he was clearing his nostrils. So, when he excused himself from their circle, no one minded very much.

That's what they do in place of wit, Brussegem thought, tell well-memorized jokes.

He stationed himself against a wall, glaring at the cheery souls. But everywhere he glared, people smiled at him with friendliness. With his dignified full head of white hair, combed straight back and majestic, and a matching imposing beard, they should all be impressed, not polite. Nearly everyone seemed to be holding a glass of alcohol in their hands; this too got on his nerves. Such a uniform, partyish attitude seemed to him an asinine social custom, with everyone the same—chitchat, sip, smile, chitchat. Breaking the irritating uniformity, Brussegem set his drink aside. He folded his arms across his chest and continued to glare defiantly.

Added to this was Brussegem's assumption that once people had discovered he was an artist, they would flock to him with curiosity and awe, presenting him with all sorts of bothersome questions and gratifying admiration. However, no one cared very much, no one seemed impressed. Upon discovering what he did for a living—"I'm an artist, a painter"—friendly strangers would momentarily look wide-eyed and interested, and nod, inquiring about what type of pictures he painted. Upon receiving the arithmetical answer, "Geometrical shapes and spaces," the people nodded their heads one last time, and dried up, wholly unable to think of any further comment to make on such an odd, strangely defined occupation.

Yates, from the other side of the room, had been noting Brussegem's increasingly gloomy state with a watchful eye, and had been scouting round

for a possible solution to Brussegem's furrowed brow, when the wife of one of his friends, Veronica Weise, came over to inquire about the identity of the imposing figure with the lion's mane and big beard.

"Brussegem, a friend of mine. Solitary type. Want to meet him?"

"A solitary type?"

"A painter, an artist. Shall I introduce you?"

"An artist?" She studied the belligerent looking man with a keener interest; she was intrigued by his furious white hair and fierce looks. Suddenly, he felt her eyes on him; he turned, inspecting her with a scowl.

She smiled in return.

"Has it had its rabies shot?" she asked Yates.

"Nope, 'fraid not. He is dangerous."

"A dangerous artist," she mused. "Intriguing."

They approached.

"Brussegem from Brussegem, I wish you to meet a future fan of yours," Yates said. "But beware, Veronica, Brussegem's idea of conversation is talking about the meaning of life, and how it hasn't any."

She looked at Brussegem, unsurprised, for she possessed the widespread impression that artists should talk primarily about the meaning of life: that's what they were made for.

"Silly ass," Brussegem said.

"He likes to be upset with me," Yates explained to Veronica.

"Especially because I will not write university teaching manuals masquerading as novels. Brussegem and I have opposing artistic tendencies, you see."

"Fool. I just expect more out of art than you do."

"Yes, you expect a great, great deal of meaning in your art, whereas I, simple fool that I am, incline toward pleasant doses of amusement."

"You're misrepresenting me completely, little man."

Veronica looked back and forth between the two, smiling. Yates patted her on the arm. "Whatever. You two amuse yourselves. If it should bite, Veronica, slap it firmly on the muzzle."

Together they laughed; Yates skipped off. Brussegem, disliking

private jokes, stared after his friend sullenly.

"Tell me," Veronica began politely, "what do you paint?"

Brussegem's arms tightened around his chest. He was now at the absolute end of his social tether. He had no more patience to dole out friendly answers in neat mouthfuls to the bland inquiries of the utterly uninterested.

"Do you really care, one way or the other?"

"Well, I asked, didn't I?"

She understood this intense man was displeased with something at the moment. But, being a married woman with several stormy love affairs behind her, she was well versed in the ways of pouting men; usually it took only a sweetening of the voice to solve the problem and bring a man out. This she did. "Please."

Brussegem was stubborn. She had sounded sincere, and sweetly so. He inclined his head toward her; perhaps she wasn't just one more idle female with automatic manners. Her eyes were respectively widened for the reception of his wisdom. He had been waiting for this all evening.

He regarded her closer. She wore a hairdresser's hairdo: curled, firm, and inhuman to the touch. In each earlobe were pinned one delicate, white pearl; larger pearls were laced round her neck; she was thoroughly covered by a thick, even, expensive suntan, most likely procured on holiday in Spain; she was dressed in a clinging gown, which revealed flesh that perhaps could have better remained concealed: brown breast tops buoyed out of her dress, yet sudden weight loss must have recently occurred, since each time she moved her arms—to sip her drink or scratch her nose—the loosening flesh on the upper portion of her arm wobbled slightly. His eyes traveled no further. Normally, he took hard pleasure in detecting reality's flaws, it suffused him with a renewed urge to take up the tools of his perfectible art and strive once more. But at this moment, with this woman, he would simply have to make do in order to make love.

"I paint..." he paused, wishing to give full dramatic emphasis, "...geometrical shapes and spaces." There, that was the acid test: if she

survived that in one piece, he would be willing, with reservations, to bed her.

"How very interesting," she said.

Brussegem smirked. "How very interesting, she said, wishing to change the subject."

"Pardon me?"

"The phrase 'how interesting' is usually a feeble euphemism for 'how very, very uninteresting'. Found mostly in over-polite, bourgeois society."

"Full-stop?"

He hesitated. "What ... do you mean, full-stop?"

"Full-stop—period—to your little sermon on my insincerity. Is it my turn to say something now?"

"Hmm."

"You're wrong."

He grunted, perplexed; she was abruptly becoming more individual than he had first judged. This was an unforeseen complication.

"So, Mr. Brussegem, what do your paintings have to say?"

"They have nothing to say. They are." He was prepared to speak to her seriously, but what he now required was a little more encouragement, one last sure word of *bona fide* interest.

"Elaborate, please."

That was all he needed. He began a somewhat lengthy discourse that had little to do with giving a crystal clear explanation on his rather foreboding "geometrical shapes and spaces". In fact, he had nothing to add on the matter. For him, the definition was the explanation, which left little room for intellectual elaboration. His words had more to do with *why* no one cared what he was talking about, or what he was creating. And if this was quite beside the point, it was nevertheless the point he wanted to make.

Summed up, his harangue went thus: They (other artists) who compromised (capitulated), or simply, foolishly, enjoyed devising mere entertainments—(here he coughed twice, and it sounded suspiciously like "Yates-Yates")—these so-called "creators", oh they would have their money,

they would have their worthless renown, oh yes; while he (brave Brussegem), would remain obscure yet ever following his ideals, his unique vision, retaining his self respect, his pride, his intrinsic truth and integrity. He reasoned that *he* was the richer, the grander. Pausing, expanding his chest, filling it with talking air, he elaborated that he could not bring himself to see popular success as anything more than artistic capitulation. One had to do something wrong—something commercial—to have many people appreciate one's worth. A unique vision was for a few equally unique persons who could share in and savor its riches. As for the anonymous majority, which he envisioned as a shoving, hairy mass of upturned faces shouting indiscriminate, wholehearted praise, well, acceptance from such beings could only be degrading in the extreme, and most certainly, fatally, dilute the—his—uniqueness.

He ended, believing he had made his point—and quite an impression.

Veronica Weise looked amused. "In that case, I'd like very much to see some of your paintings."

"To see whether or not you belong to the unique?"

He had spoken the sentence with a condescending smirk, which led her to believe he was making a healthy, self-deprecatory jest, so her next comment was made in that spirit.

"Yes, we two elitists may go and behold your daring art and be utterly religious in our seventh heaven."

Brussegem's smile, a feeble light at best, abruptly went out. His arms, which had become unglued during the harangue to help express his ideas in the air, retreated to the firm security across his chest. A small cloudburst seemed to be begin raining on his face.

Seeing the sudden gloom, Veronica said, "Sorry to sound too flippant, but I am interested. I find the whole subject fascinating." Compliments were the way she handled men who had little knowledge of women. She found the lofty egotist fascinating: he spoke so earnestly about matters she never thought about: art, uniqueness, the masses. He was definitely not the type of person one would casually meet on the beach in Spain.

"I used to dabble in painting myself when I was younger. A little, nothing like you, of course, just here and there." She told him how she had tried to fit in the business world for thirteen career-minded years; finally, she had found the existence insipid, and quit to let her husband earn all the bacon. With her biological clock about to ring its last alarm, she had given birth to her only child, hoping that traditional motherhood might bring tranquility. It had, for a while.

Brussegem, half-listening, had been considering the situation, her, and his need, resulting in a slight nod. "Okay."

She was pausing in talking about herself, looking up with his interruption.

She had to recall what he was talking about, so involved in her own slightly sad world had she been. "Then we'll go see your painting?"

A woman in a group of people on the far side of the room was tickled by a flirting man; she laughed horribly, enjoying herself tremendously. Someone else shoved a plateful of peanuts all over the floor. Another popped a cork from a champagne bottle; it ricocheted off someone's chest and foam bubbled forth. Yates' party was officially moving up another notch.

"And leave all your jolly friends?" Brussegem gestured around the room.

"Not my friends. Thought they were yours."

"Don't be absurd. I'm basically asocial; I can't stand these chatty gatherings for very long. *Hello* and *how are you* are a waste of time and an insult to my intelligence."

"You've a few problems, Mr. Brussegem."

"So I've been told."

"I've always enjoyed polite conversation. Nothing's expected of you except to be friendly and fun. Are we going to go see your paintings, or not?"

"And your husband won't mind if you stroll out the door into the night with a strange, rather virile painter?"

"My husband might if he were standing on the other side of the room laughing with the others. The fact is, he's in various Scandinavian countries on business for the week, probably going out many strange doors with all sorts of ... who knows. He's in telecommunications; he gets people to like him and give his company money. And he's paid a great deal of this money in return for having a well-developed, likable personality. I have this arrangement with myself—I don't have to tell him anything he doesn't need to know."

A certain amount of the social graces still remained within Brussegem's skull, tugging obscurely at the edges of his consciousness. "But all these people *will* see you leaving with me. I take it one or two do know you and your husband, but not about your little agreement. And if they saw—"

"Oh, you're so old-fashioned. How quaint and touching. In that case, perhaps your paintings *can* wait a while."

"Let's go."

"Just one last drink for the road."

They went over to the portable bar. He talked further about his paintings, about the aesthetic distance he took—how there was no room for the human element in the purest art. How form was freeing. His hands helped his explanations as they carved the air for meaning; Yates passed by.

"Now who are you aesthetically groping?"

Brussegem let his hands fall to his sides. Veronica turned to Yates.

"He's telling me all about his paintings, and I must admit, I don't exactly grasp every little thing. Is he decadent?"

"Morally or artistically?" Yates replied.

"Both, I hope."

They laughed while Brussegem stood there, undecided how to react.

Yates inquired, "How's that sunset you're painting for me? Nearing completion?"

Brussegem frowned. "If you wish."

"How many triangles and hexagons does it have so far?"

"Sixteen."

"I want to see it," Veronica said, setting down her empty glass and slipping her arm into Brussegem's. "He's promised to show them to me. We were just leaving, weren't we, Mr. B?"

Yates laughed at Brussegem's emotionless face; he reached up to tug at the man's whiskers. "You devil. You may be finished with living," he gave a harder pull, "but living ain't finished with you." He let loose, backed away, saying, "Nighty-night," and was gone.

"Let's go."

They rode in Veronica's car, he directing, she responding with lefts and rights along unknown roads. She found him unlike those civil servants and business types she usually came into contact with. Having settled in Belgium with her husband over fifteen years before, she had been immediately swallowed up by corporate responsibilities and a small, closed circle of expatriates, mostly Anglo-Saxons. This circle's problems became hers. She knew the names of their children as well as their domestic pets; everyone paid regular visits and made regular telephone calls to one another, relating how the rather dull, minor events in their lives were getting along. Rarely was someone new and unusual allowed access to their intimate circle. Someone like Brussegem was wholly unusual.

When they arrived *chez* Brussegem, he explained that his atelier was in the attic. To gain entrance, you had to climb up a narrow metal ladder of twelve rungs, slide a wooden hatch back, and step up and in. Once in the attic, Brussegem switched on the lights, pointed out a mass of canvases against one wall, and let her look.

She looked. They seemed awful. "They're wonderful."

Brussegem stood back in the shadows observing. He was certain she did not understand what she was looking at, had no idea what to look for; but at the moment, that did not concern him. She still possessed a fine, thin waist; her legs looked to have an agreeable shape; her neck, though,

had the beginnings of taut tendons. After another moment, she looked around at him, her lips slightly parted to utter a comment, a question, an observation, but seeing him there in the shadows, looking at her, she stopped, and smiled.

He went to her and embraced her firmly. She smelt like make-up. They kissed.

Then, he possessed her, in all her charms, there before the collective audience of his impassive paintings.

5.

In the morning, wanting to surprise him, Veronica crept out of bed before Brussegem was awake. She snuck out to the kitchen, where, humming and feeling cozy and satisfied, she checked his refrigerator and poured some orange juice. Returning to the bedroom, she sat on the edge of the bed and whispered, "Mr. B?" She placed her hand lightly on his shoulder.

He grunted, smacked his lips, and made a gurgling sound.

"Mr. B.," she said. "Good morning. I have some orange juice for you. Mr. B?" A single eye eased open. She offered the eye the orange juice. "Here," she kissed him, "good morning."

He said nothing, but looked at her and at the orange juice. At length he sipped the liquid.

"Don't you say good morning? The sun's shining."

With her sitting on the edge of his bed, he made an effort to concentrate his still-thick brain, propping himself up, sipping some more orange juice to wet the way for his first words of the day.

"My dear, I cannot be bothered to say hello or goodbye, and rarely say good morning and hardly ever goodnight. It's a common, dull routine of needless reminders that days are passing and I'm dying. It's not merely some harmless, social custom. To me."

"How odd you see life." She smiled and then she wrinkled. She stroked his chest. He was a furry fellow, and she enjoyed the plush feel. She was wearing an oversized turtleneck of his; he reached over and

attempted to lift it, saying, "But speaking of good mornings...."

She jumped up and told him no, she was going to fix a nice breakfast for him.

He arose, she fixed, they ate. She asked him questions about his life, about his likes and dislikes, what he did for amusement. "Do you go to movies?"

"Rarely."

"So you read?"

"Yes, of course. Each evening." He felt he was being interviewed; he was not certain whether he liked or resented it.

"I enjoy reading Russian writers. The 19th century ones. Tolstoy, Chekhov. I just finished *Anna Karenina*—"

Brussegem interrupted her. "I have tried the Russians, their too big novels. But I can't take all those sons of *viches*." He squeezed out a self-amused burst of laughter.

She thought about it a second. "Oh, I think get it."

"Anyway, my dear, I don't do or think anything without the awareness that I'm a painter." Having finished his eggs, bacon, and three slices of toast, he felt in good humor, with empty loins and peace within his breast. He stood up from the table and stretched. "I'm not a man who happens to be a painter; I'm a painter who happens to be a man."

"Where do you get all your ideas?"

"They come. I make them."

"I envy you. I haven't a single idea in my head!" She said this gaily, as if wishing to turn the failing into a light boast.

"So, do you want to see my current work?"

Feeling as though she were in a unique place and time, she said yes. She felt as though she were about to be let into the secrets of art and artists. He turned the easel in the living room that held his newest painting so she could see. It appeared as bizarre and incomprehensible as the ones she'd seen the night before; abstract and colorful and—and she didn't know what. She tilted her head left, then to the right, looking at the odd

thing. Then she decided to be overwhelmed and enthusiastic. She clapped her hands and turned round.

"It's a masterpiece, a masterpiece, a masterpiece!"

"But my dear, it's only one painting." Chuckling, he gave her a hug.

She leaned against him. "I like it." She looked at it again, and became a bit sad. "I envy you. You can do something special, something no one else can do, or maybe even understand. Me, I can't do much. I mean, I can do a little bit of everything." Her voice fell deeper into melancholy.

"Nothing, really."

"There, there, Veronica, I'm sure you have your talents, like everyone."

"I'm just a housewife."

Brussegem was running out of soothing, charitable things to say. She had softened and relaxed him—he hadn't felt so friendly and open in some time—but this note of sorrow entering into her voice sobered him. He wasn't used to reassuring people, or listening to their problems and trying to understand. He had lost the habit of giving sympathy; painting was his only concern. Other people's problems were other people's problems.

"I'm sorry," she said, trying to force a smile, feeling him stiffening. "Tell me about your paintings."

"They come to me. What time is it?"

"Oh, come, Mr. B." She nudged him, suppressing her mood of a moment ago. "Tell. I want to know. Why these kind of paintings? Tell me so I can be an ordinary person with special secrets."

"They are those kinds of paintings because I'm that type of painter."

"That's an impressive sounding answer. I'll have to remember that. Does the style have a name? Like, Impressionism, Expressionism, or something? Abstract Expressionism I've heard of."

"Some would say my particular works belong to the Geometrical School. It's considered old hat by some."

"Is it? It's the first time I've seen it." She studied the painting again. "But I see how they could call it geometrical."

"My so-called geometrical paintings reflect geometrical life. Like

those people last night: well-conforming, simple ciphers. Like a one-dimensional geometrical drawing, as I experience modern life."

"That's pretty hard on modern life, isn't it?"

"It's life's fault, not mine. I paint what I see."

"Can you paint me?" She went next to his canvas and stood facing him. "Can you paint what you see?" He saw that in the morning light, unkempt, unpainted, and pale, she looked as if she were in her forties but in her case the numerals were not showing much pity. However, with a teasing smile, she removed the turtleneck sweater, revealing her naked planes and angles, and she looked just fine.

"Do I look like a one-dimensional cipher to you? Hmm, Mr. B?"

He slowly grinned; she was pleased.

"Mr. B.," she said, "you're looking at modern life."

He did no painting that morning, and none in the afternoon, either. But he insisted, around five, that he had to get to work. She said fine, of course, she had to go anyway. She laughed, saying the nanny must be wondering what had happened to her.

"I have a little girl. She just took her first steps two weeks ago. Her father wasn't even around to see, of course."

"What type of man is your husband?"

"The basic kind who likes to be married. I'm there to support."

Good, Brussegem thought: she's married, solidly. Good. When they washed and dressed, she asked a few more innocuous-seeming questions about his life, questions that slowly evolved into more pointed queries into his past and its secrets. As he saw the drift of her mind, he grew more guarded. Feeling this immediately, she assured she only wanted only to know how he came to be Brussegem from Brussegem, as Yates called him. It was a silly story, he said. Years ago, when he'd decided to relocate to Europe and give all his energies to painting, he'd romantically selected this village because it matched his last name. For a short while it amused him to be Brussegem from Brussegem. Now, he said, it was all a bit silly.

"And how did you ever become Veronica from wherever you're from?"

"Marry husband. Corporation tells husband, go there. He goes. Good wife humbly follows. Does a little corporate career herself. Gets somewhere, feeling she's gotten nowhere. Awful modern world, as you say. Do you sell many of your paintings?"

"Not a great deal," he replied. How did he manage to support himself, then? Here he grew cagey. He made his feeble living through stocks and bonds and investments of past incomes; he had bought this cozy house upon arriving what seemed ages ago when property values were low. He tried to change the subject. When would he see her again? Soon. She had to arrange things. He informed her of his strict regimen for working. She said she would respect this. He walked her to her car.

She turned to him. "Do you like me?"

He smiled. "But of course." He ran the back of his fingers along her cheek: the flesh, the angle, the heat. The skull below, he reflected.

"I like you," she said. "Don't know about love, but I like you well enough."

"Perfect."

"You're different from the usual acquaintances I spend time with."

Enough. Now it was time for her to go. "Until the next time, Veronica. Must paint."

"Oh yes! Sorry. You artists." She seemed to have a fondness for the word. "Kiss?" A kiss. "Goodbye, artist. I'll be back. Love!"

He watched her car disappear down the road, then scraped his shoes off on his coconut mat, seeing the dirt on the floor they'd tracked in the night before. He took half an hour to make a superficial cleansing of the place; with things semi-neat and tidy, all traces of any visitor erased, he turned to his painting.

He studied the latest colors and shapes on the canvas. Finding himself devoid of ideas, he touched it up.

There were incidents and facts he had withheld from Veronica, important bits of his history that, as far as he knew, no one in Belgium was aware of. His wife, for instance. He had left three teenagers and a twenty-year-old marriage and bankruptcy of a small real-estate business he'd

helped form years before. Escaped to be Brussegem from Brussegem, no longer middle class, no longer a dull small businessman hustling and dealing, a mere "one more" of mankind. With the sum of money he'd plucked from the failing business just before its final collapse, he had traveled Europe, investing the majority of the funds, and ever since had collected a small though sufficient trickle of monthly money. And it seemed it might last forever. Occasionally, he would wonder how his wife got on, how his children had ended up, what they did. Once in a while he would imagine their daily lives. But less and less often as time went by; hardly ever, nowadays.

As for love.... No, he had no time for love, no room. He was proud that he had never said the words *I love you* to any woman except the one he had married. He refused to emote without logical consequence; *I love you* seemed, to him, to inevitably call for *marry me*. And, technically, he was already married, so he was saved from having to say I love you again. It was neat and tidy. He hoped his wife was still alive.

He was proud of the clever life he had made for himself. He was pleased by the night before, by this jolly woman he had seduced and who would seemingly fulfill his basic needs; plus, she was married, with a child, so he'd have plenty of time alone to create—she could not develop into a bother. How pleased he felt, as he played with his paint that life was once again working out. He hummed as he filled in the edges of his current personal creation.