

BRUSSEGEM,
a Snug Hell

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<http://hidden-people.net/brussegem.html>

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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—sensuous 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 mewling 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.