

BRUSSEGEM,
a Snug Hell

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

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.