

Brussegem, a snug hell

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

### PART 3

6.

It was a few days later, while Brussegem was putting the final, exact touches on his latest canvas, when he heard a car come crunching up the gravel of his driveway, the slamming of its door, then the hard knocking at his main entrance—all this smack in the middle of his working afternoon, when all sensible people, and his few acquaintances, knew he was to be left strictly in peace with no interruptions, no matter what the death and destruction. He went to answer the door.

"Who the h—"

Veronica Weise gave him a kiss to close his mouth, patted his cheek, smiled, came in, and took off her coat, tossing it on the sofa. She strode about the room, looking at his painting, looking out the rear window, avoiding his eyes.

"Hello! I'm here! Returned to the scene of the crime. Guess what happened? My husband kicked me out! Just like that!" She fiddled with her bracelet. "Who would've ever thought that you would be the last straw! That's what he called you. You, he said, are one lover too many—out. As if I've had dozens."

She put down the candle holder she was toying with and turned to him, throwing up her arms.

"I don't know why I'm here, but here I am!" she said brightly, and went into his arms. But his arms remained inert by his sides. He stared at her.

"Don't worry, it's only temporary, Mr. B. from B." She tried placing her cheek against his to nuzzle. Her eyes lighted on his ear; he had frizzled bushes sprouting from the holes. She fought an impulse to pull away.

"My husband thinks I'm a restless, fickle, confused woman. He's sure I'll be back when I've straightened myself back into the position he wants me to be in." She moved away from Brussegem's unresponsive chest and again wandered around the

room fingering things. "In the meantime, I shall have my little adventure."

"It's utterly impossible that you stay."

She turned around. "Don't be silly. You're responsible for the break-up of my marriage. Be responsible, take charge, love me for a little. It'll be fun."

Brussegem's exterior was stone-cold, but within he was utterly flabbergasted. "I'm sorry but this is not a rooming house."

"Seemed we were quite a friendly twosome throughout the night just a while ago. Even into the day, lover." She went over to him and kissed him on the nose.

"You wouldn't refuse your little love-buddy?"

"But I work here. I'm always alone. I'm not used to—no, no, no."

Brussegem backed away a step. Veronica smiled and pursued.

"Ssssh." She kissed him quickly. "It's only for a short while, Mr. B. We'll have nice times. I'll just put myself in some corner, quiet as a church mouse; you get on with your art. Don't you think it'll be interesting for both of us?"

"Veronica."

"Ssssh. Look." She sat down on the sofa, tucked her hands between her legs, her mouth tight. She inclined her face toward the floor, remaining completely still; he could not help smiling a bit. She saw. "See, I'll be the best helpmate an artist ever had in the history of ... art!" She jumped up, kissed him, grabbed up her coat and asked, "What do you want for dinner? I'll go buy something. Name it." She halted for a moment and a bewildered look crossed her face. "But, first, where's the bathroom again? Wasn't it...?" She looked around vaguely. "Where?"

"Upstairs. End of hall." Brussegem was considering her proposition, seeing the pleasure while having a number of misgivings ... and yet. As he watched her race up the stairs he knew he was going completely against his purpose in life, his moral creed, his definition of the solitary artist. He was making a very large mistake by not insisting she depart—but out of an old curiosity, a long buried need for intimacy, he resolved to let things take their course, for a few days only. He smiled to himself while he put away and cleaned up his day's work. Then he halted abruptly, thinking he had heard a faint sobbing from upstairs. He went to the bottom of the stairs to listen, but whatever it was had stopped.

7.

Things thereafter proceeded quickly.

There was the love-making; that was nice. Brussegem found himself full steam into a productive period with his art works, and Veronica sat and quietly hummed, looking out the windows. All appeared serene and peaceful. He told himself he did not need someone to aid him in his work, to help him forward with creation, but she did manage to become a mild inspiration. He would find himself stepping back from the canvas to inspect and tilt his head, then glance sideways at her while she sat so quietly nearby, and he'd smile, strangely pleased and comforted, and continue his painting. But. He was determined to keep this happily ever after life simple, which meant that any tasty, fancily cooked meals specially prepared for him were to remain in his mind plain meat and potatoes; and she had to keep fixed in her mind that the temporary roof over her head was simply a roof, not a home; and the sex was to stay sex: not love: the basics of life, nothing complicated. And it could all end tomorrow—not to forget that.

"Getting hungry, Mr. B?" she asked.

"A bit," he answered.

"I'll go into the village and buy something fresh—there's nothing in the house, anyway. What would you like tonight? Meat, fish, poultry? Whatever you like. Anything. Choose."

"Well—"

She jumped up. "Leave it to me. You paint. I'll take care of the rest." She hurried away.

Now this was perfect. This was the way happily ever after should be run. Minimum of fuss. Now, if it would only continue so.

When she returned from the village, he had packed up his painting for the day and was seated on the couch reading a book. She said hello and told him not to move. She claimed she would take care of everything, just everything. He took her word for it and remained couch bound. He heard her struggling with the grocery bags, heard frying things, and heard hustling movements at the dining room table nearby, but he did not look up and offered no helping hand, he just read and waited for her to come and tell him she had taken care of everything.

And this too fitted in with his wishes: to be left alone.

"Come and get it."

The well-cooked food melted gently onto his taste buds; afterward, he sat back on the couch, sipping tea, full and delighted; ah life....

Later, in bed, with the sighs and hard breathing fading, they nestled together sleepily.

Next day, he spent eight hours painting.

She sat watching the rain, then the drizzle.

Once, in the late afternoon, after having spent several hours in each other's presence without words, she heard him suddenly chuckle to himself as though he were enjoying private treasures. She cleared her throat and asked him what he was giggling about. Her question shocked him: had he been giggling to himself? He had forgotten she was there, so wrapped up in his colors and angles he had become. He realized he might have to begin explaining private sounds he made, even when he wasn't aware of making them; he must beware. "Nothing," he said.

There was a silence. "I see," she said. She got up, stretched, and went to his side to study his painting. There was another silence. "Mr. B., what's the market for your paintings these days?"

He took umbrage, and replied stiffly: "The market is someplace I buy vegetables." Then he muttered, "Foul profit motive in everything."

She took the hint and did not question the commercial value of his thoughtful creations. She returned to her chair, but abruptly turned and said, "You're just a tiny

mite silly, aren't you?"

He picked up his brush. "I haven't considered the matter fully." He painted.

"Why don't you paint something else sometime?"

He'd heard this before. "I would not enjoy painting what you call 'something else'. I am a limited man on purpose. I know it and cultivate it. It is the way I've planned it, formed myself. There are few things I actually like. On the other hand, there's a great deal I dislike, and I do my disliking with much pleasure. My joys, you may even say, are mainly negative. You are sharing your present life with an artist with his own perspective. Don't forget that."

"I know. I won't. Oh well."

He boasted of his limitations as if they were a testament to his uniqueness. He took, in fact, a great deal of pride in having a great deal of pride in himself.

This was certainly a different experience for Veronica, who sat in the chair hoping to be invigorated and shown interesting artistic depths she hadn't yet experienced. He was indeed showing her ways and ideas she hadn't encountered, but they ran against her preconceptions of the divine depths of the life of art. She had always been under the impression that art was an enlarging thing that widened horizons; his artistic horizons seemed to be quite deliberately narrowed. Plus, the beauty he practiced was alien to her ordinary eye. Veronica gave him the benefit of the doubt: perhaps she just didn't know enough about these matters to judge intelligently. He was the expert.

She made herself comfortable in the chair again and watched the fine rain monotonously fall. She stirred.

"I hate it here—this climate, this country. I can't stand drizzles. That's all it does here. Drizzle. Such a half-hearted thing. A downpour, I can understand. But this, I have no use for. All it is, is depressing." She studied the drizzle a while longer.

"I like change. My father was in the military, and when I was little, we traveled everywhere. Here and there. I got used to change." She got up from the chair.

"Listen, I'm going to go out, get our supper, do something else." She put on her coat and went to the front door, picking up her purse on the way. "I'll be back in a little." She looked around, somewhat distracted and nervous. "Um ... okay?" She smiled briefly and left.

Only then did Brussegem look up from his canvas.

When four hours had passed, he figured she wasn't returning. He shrugged on his coat and went to fetch his own supper. He usually got a bargain at the mini-supermarket in the village by waiting at the fish counter for seven o'clock, at which time the officially day-old fish went for half price.

As a tiny treat, he chose sole—an ample hunk for one person. He paid and left and thought "Women." She had probably wanted to make her little life a little more fun for a day or two, frivolously believing he was romantically artistic and, hence, colorful, and that he'd be some sort of *treat* for her. "Women," he repeated.

Approaching his house, he saw lights on within. He was certain he had carefully turned everything off; he always did. He slowed his steps. It could only be one thing; as he got closer, he could see her car parked at the side of his house. Reaching the front door, he turned down his lips and put on a grouchy face. He hesitated before opening, hearing someone crying inside. He almost muttered "women" again. Still with his grouchy expression on his face, he opened his door.

Veronica, from the kitchen, looked up, not crying at all. A baby, which was cradled in her arms was performing the quite impressive crying. Brussegem froze.

"Hi," she called. "Sorry I took so long coming back." She moved toward him, smiling, rocking the baby. "Went home to get a few things. Unfortunately, my sweet husband was there and we got into a big fight. Tremendous fight, really. We called each other all sorts of names; he told me never to come back."

The baby's cries began to subside. Veronica gave Brussegem's severe face a quick kiss and swerved into the living room, placing the baby in a crib that had already been installed in a corner. Brussegem followed her, overwhelmed, open-mouthed. She continued in a lower voice, so as not to disturb the child.

"He told me he thinks I'm just a stupid old typical runaway wife getting a thrill out of taking up with a bohemian. That's you, you'll be happy to know. Then before I left he told me he wouldn't wait long, that I'm making a foolish mistake, that I'd better reconsider. He repeated he wouldn't wait long, but I shut the door and pretended I didn't hear. I thought of you the whole time and how you wouldn't've

liked the scene at all."

She had come back to Brussegem, smiling, right under his beard, acting as though she'd been naughty, and making up for it by telling this amusing story, hoping to be forgiven, hugged and loved. He stared steadily over her head, toward the far corner, at the crib.

"Is that," he said slowly, "a baby?"

"You noticed."

"A baby?"

"Yes," she answered. "Mine. She's too young to be left alone with him. He's a busy businessman, never home. Couldn't just leave my baby with some stranger, a nanny—"

"A baby in my..." Brussegem didn't know how to complete his sentence. He wanted to say, my *house*; he wanted to yell, My *kingdom*; my God!

Veronica stood back, studying Brussegem.

"She's cute. Don't worry, she won't be much trouble. Look." She smiled at Brussegem's intensely worried look, then he glanced apprehensively at the crib.

The baby, although placed in her familiar crib, seemed to find the foreign surroundings—the walls, the rugs, and the strange pictures—deeply distressing. The ceiling was not a soft blue, as at home, to which she was accustomed. To the left of her was just more wall, and to the right was the large room with strange objects. Things looked foreboding; she grew less pleased; soon she felt like crying again. Then there was suddenly this unfamiliar man cautiously peeking at her from above. He had small eyes and flaring nostrils. He had a big beard. This was the last straw. The child began to wail.

Bewildered, though keeping a stoical countenance, Brussegem stepped back, letting Veronica get to the child to soothe and coo and quiet it. Something slowly moving on the floor at his left made Brussegem nearly whirl around to attack.

"What's *that*," he cried, pointing at the thing.

Veronica looked. "My cat."

A calico cat, slightly bulging at the middle, approached the couch calmly. It paused, looked up toward Brussegem and blinked twice, slow and sensuous, then leapt upon the couch, sniffed daintily, curled, and settled.

"Impossible," Brussegem declared.

"Impossible?" Veronica repeated. The child had quieted, the cat purred, and she came up to him. "Kiss me."

"It's impossible."

"Kiss me."

"Impossible."

So she kissed him.

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