

BESIEGED

(An Illustrated Novel in Installments)

*In helmets and high boots, or only in hats and half naked,
they will destroy us by fire and sword. It will be very beautiful.
We could not wish for a better end ...*
Jean Genet

Reclining in his deep easy chair, with his hands resting comfortably upon the cool blue satin, his head lightly sunk in the high, soft headrest, and his eyes half closed, Dr. Evžen Gráf luxuriated in the simple joy of relaxation. A difficult day behind us. More difficult ones ahead. Snooze a little while, Evžen.

Then suddenly from the floor below, a heavy wooden thump and then another. What am I supposed to do, sleep more quietly? Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom. What is that kid downstairs doing, that ... Borek Trojan, what's he doing down there? Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom. Working off his excess energy, I guess. Youth ... Boom. It doesn't concern you. He'll soon grow tired of it. Take it easy. Boom. Boom. Boom. More? So, there you have it. Noise is a simply necessity for them. Just like silence for me. Why doesn't Roman make any noise? At sixteen ... That glass bottle in his briefcase ... ether. At sixteen! Talk to him. Hopeless. He'd only get more stubborn. The need to rebel. He won't get his hands on any cocaine. One of the few advantages of socialism. We drank absinthe in our day. Can't understand the young ... The only thing to do is try to help them.

Crack! – Zita slams the bathroom door. She's been so nervous lately. The summer's been too hot. Seems to keep getting hotter. Both of us prefer the winter. That first time in the Alps... "The snow is really blue..." enchanted, exhilarated, calm. How she laughed ... snow in her hair. In actuality the snow was violet.

Have to pee. Too often. Prostate? Probably not yet ... Drink less. An apple's enough in the evening. Peel the tough, neurotic rind from the sweet kernel of simple nature: the slow buildup of pressure in the bladder, the urge to urinate, aping the libido's curve, until it is a burning necessity, exploding orgiastically with the sweet numbness of satiation, drifting into soothing relief. What was the name of that Renaissance thinker from Feuchtwanger's *The Ugly Duchess*, with his seven delights: eating, drinking,

relieving oneself after eating, relieving oneself after drinking, bathing, eroticism, and the seventh, the greatest – sleep ...

The ceiling thundered with an insane stomping right above his head. Doop. Doop. Doopity doopity doop. The Serafins. They're probably jumping a meter off the ground. A man's the only one who can stomp like that. Someone up there's intentionally being cruel. Doop. Doop. Doop. Doop. Alex is not a good person. With his disposition, world view, belief system, or rather fanatical disbelief. Please let me sleep.

It keeps intruding. Why do you keep listening? Strange sounds ... he's up there with a girl. With Madda. His sister. The burning blood of the Borgias was satiated only with itself, writes Klabund. And he tells how Lucrezia, after seeing her first bullfight and learning that the bull must die, had asked her father Rodrigo to let the bull enjoy one last heifer. The bull then straddled three. Alexander VI was certainly a great Pope and statesman. He divided up the South American continent wisely, moderately, and thoroughly between the rival powers in such a way that the division remained in force for centuries. Compared to him, the United Nations and the Security Council are pitiful bunglers.

What's he doing up there with her? It bothers you, doesn't it, Evžen. Oui, c'est vrai. That Alex ... a brutal boy, of barbaric proportions, his insolent, mocking glance, his virile stench ... Before each man was executed, Lucrezia di Borgia would let three nuns into his cell and watch them from the window. She would have him sent for. And she would participate in his execution. Stretch it out. Spice it up with torture ... *The taut muscles of his back convulse and chafe against the wooden post soaked with his own burning sweat Groaning as during orgasmic pleasure His twitching arms are drawn and chained to the singed beam Look*

This gives you pleasure Me too Just look

Enough. The complicated activating apparatus of a decrepit man, right, Evžen, old boy? The ancient Hebrews would arouse themselves without allowing things to take their natural course and thereby did they preserve their manhood well into old age. Shem lived five hundred years after begetting Arphaxad, and he had sons and daughters. Arphaxad was thirty-five when he begat Salah. And after siring Salah, Arphaxad lived four hundred and three more years, and he had sons and daughters ... that's what it says in Genesis. An interesting hypothesis is that years were shorter then, because they counted them according to the orbit of a heavenly body unknown to us today and which, according to another hypothesis, then crashed into the Earth, creating Australia, which would account for the completely different geological composition of that truly deformed conti-

ment. Fantastic, of course. But didn't they recently find the remains of an ancient vessel on the biblical mount of Ararat? Of course, it doesn't have to be Noah's ark. But no matter whose it was, how did it get three hundred meters above sea-level in a place snow-covered all year round? In other respects, we must consider the problematic treatment of –

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! Awful metal blows from somewhere above my head. The Tušls? What's going on? BANG! BANG! Like someone up there beating a heavy BANG! blunt metal instrument on hollow metal ... BANG! the pipes? BANG! BANG! But that's a little overdoing it, n'est-ce pas? BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! Now they're going at one another. Somewhere on the stairs ...

They don't intend to grant you any sleep, poor Eugene. It probably wouldn't do you any good to go and ask them. They don't like you. How can I win their friendship? ... The only thing to do is try to help them. It's too hot this afternoon.

Relax. Waves of fatigue are flowing from your back ... your head ... your arms ... your forearms ... hands ... fingers ... fingertips ...

"Roman! – Can you hear me?" Zita calls him from the bathroom. "Go and see what's going on upstairs..." Roman walks down the hallway. Out. He leaves the door ajar. You should have closed it, son, it'll be even louder now.

Entspannung. Disconnect. Relax each muscle in succession. A piece of cake. Just think about them. Disconnect. The muscles of the forehead first. Imagine them. One after the other. Now the left temple. Flowing, slowly, calmly. The right temple. More. Completely. It just takes a little willpower. Now the facial muscles, the left cheek. Roman is back. And Zita is leaving the bathroom. Roman doesn't want to tell her anything. Is Zita coming here? No. She's walking down the hall. Out. The door is still open. The yelling keeps getting louder.

Please let me sleep. I'm exhausted. Tomorrow. Domani, domani. They're yelling at Zita. How they hate her. How they hate us. How to persuade them? How to help them? Zita's coming back down the stairs. Walking back down the hallway. That's not Zita! They're invading---

"Excuse me, please," says Julda Serafin from the doorway. "Your door was open, so I took the liberty..."

"My door is always open. What's going on up there?"

"My brother Alex has seduced my sister Madda. Now we're asking for your help."

"How can I help you?"

"Take my sister in. I beg you."

“Of course, such a solution–” an unclean girl in our apartment. For who knows how long ... But she can’t sleep with Alex anymore ... But Roman’s reaching puberty, and in the same apartment ... But it’s better than ether ... But an unclean girl in our apartment ... “–is no solution, of course.”

“I don’t know where else to put my sister. She can’t stay on the first floor, not with Teo and not with Borek in the itinerants quarters. The Tušls have just one room on the third floor, and they’re expecting a baby. And on the second floor you have three rooms...”

“There isn’t any way to swap?”

“Only if Alex moved in with Borek Trojan downstairs, but I asked him and he said no.”

“We could have him thrown right out. He’s committed a punishable offence. I’ll call the police–”

“No, please don’t. Who would that help?”

It wouldn’t work, besides. He’s indispensable to the factory. Unlike the director. One of the disadvantages of socialism. “Tomorrow I’ll call a meeting of the factory administration and the individual sections. I’ll telephone the People’s Committee chairman.”

“But we need help right now. It’s evening.”

“Don’t you have a relative she could...”

“No, we don’t. I’m asking you as a decent human being.”

Below the belt. “The factory director is not required to solve such situations to the detriment of his own family.”

“I’m asking you to be charitable.”

We go upstairs. Beware of acting on your first impulse, warns Talleyrand, it’s usually the noblest. Why is everyone half naked? Who scratched this girl all bloody? I don’t understand a thing. The only thing to do is help them. They look at me with hatred. I’m not the one who scratched her up, my friends! – Guilty nevertheless, confused, for some reason anxious. Zita’s trembling hand in mine.

“Okay, enough. Alex Serafin, for the time being I will refrain from filing a criminal complaint, at your brother’s request. Tomorrow you will answer to the factory administration and the individual sections.”

“Not tomorrow,” Alex grinned. “I’ve got to work on that transformer.”

“Miss Serafinová, please pack a few essential items. You’ll stay with us for a couple of days. The rest of you ... I think it’s been enough for one day.”

“Comrade Director...” Bogan Tušl commenced his apartment tirade: “We’ve arrived at a solution whereby an apartment for me would satisfy all four petitioners–”

“I will not hear a petition from the stairs except for the purpose of information. Of course, you may submit proposals through my office. Good night.”

Zita's been upset for a long time.

“If only you had seen the girl up there...”

“I saw her, darling. A few drops of hydrogen peroxide and a couple of poultices will make it all better.”

“Will she be having supper with us?”

“If you want ... Why not? It might be amusing. But first let's drive her into the bathroom.”

“And tonight? Roman...”

“Roman's sixteen, Madda's nineteen. Don't worry, I've thought of that, as well. There's no big difference between living in the same building and living in the same apartment.”

Footsteps on the stairs. She's here. A knock at the door. Zita's trembling. Why didn't she ring the doorbell? She's knocking at the door, and Zita's going to open it.

A truly amusing supper. The girl comes straight from the bathroom, late and for some reason in a huff. Roman avoids her gaze but obviously doesn't see his persistently observed plate. “Roman, you've got your sleeve in the compote.”

“Would you like rice or potatoes?” Zita kindly asks the girl.

“Whatever you have,” the girl converses.

“I always have rice with fish,” I try to explain, “but Zita and Roman prefer potatoes.”

“Aha,” the girl converses with her mouth crammed full of the peach she's just stuffed in it.

“Which would you prefer?” Zita tries again.

“I'll eat whatever you've got,” the girl converses.

Let's hope she only means today's side dish. An enormous appetite. Pleasantly infectious. That's the reason a restaurant in Stockholm pays a young woman to overeat in front of the guests. But Madda really is hungry. Nothing to laugh at. Rather compassion. A guilty conscience. As well as envy, eh, old man? You don't allow yourself to eat like that anymore. Never. Never's a horrible word. Connoting death. Connoting freedom. “Roman, you haven't touched a thing.”

“Lfkhm,” he says. Is he on ether? You must admit that even without a hint of table manners, Madda's a more agreeable dining companion. She's scrubbed pink. Zita worked on her nearly half an hour. She even put an old ribbon in her wet hair. A small, hungry, gentle girl with eyes cast down upon her plate. An hour ago bloody incest with her barbarous brother.

“Anybody like some more wine?” We all have some.

That night Zita’s still upset. Her eyes glisten in the darkness. She drinks too much. More and more. She hides the empty bottles in her suitcase. When I returned from Paris, I found six of them in there. Three liters of cognac in four days. I dread the next time I have to leave you alone.

“I’ll never forget what I saw on the stairs...” she whispers over and over. “How they were all standing around her ... Do you know where she had teeth marks on her? When I washed her in the bathroom...” So this is what’s upsetting her. Just like that time in Opatija. That woman who’d fallen off a steep cliff, and all around her an agitated crowd. “Let me through, I’m a doctor-” Zita lied and knelt down right beside her. Why did you make that up?

My dear neurotic one. Your body is more dear to me than my own. “Hold me tight...” she whimpers. I entwine myself all around her as if I were taking her prisoner, as if I wanted to shield her, eclipse her, and submerge myself in her. Hide her in myself. She loves this more than making love itself. She’s told me so.

She turns her face away. She stares into the darkness. What does she want there, what does she descry? Strangely disturbed. What does she see there? Don’t flee. Her sobbing, which I love above all else in the whole world. She suddenly falls asleep. At least her eyes are closed and her breathing regular. Is she asleep? She doesn’t answer.

Silence at last. Salutary silence. Sleep, dear Evžen. Thanks for your permission, sir. A difficult day behind us. More difficult ones ahead. And growing fewer. Between the trunks, the first rays of light are getting through, the forest is coming to an end. The summit. *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh.* Over all summits there is peace. Still five more years. I’m useful. Just five more years.

Tomorrow. A summer morning in the cruel heart of raging Europe. The morning light upon the wall across the room. Illuminating the Tibetan rug that hangs there. Warming the colorful tones of the bright red, yellow, and blue vertical lines of the unforgivingly geometrical painting by Richard Paul Lohse, *Rhythmic Progression*. What does the small black square in the lower right-hand corner of the canvas mean? A period? At the end of what?

Tomorrow. A summer morning in a forgotten corner of expiring Europe. A glass of milk. Sunlight on the sidewalk. Leafy trees. Dew on a patch of grass ... Life’s little pleasures.

Fifty-five: a senatorial age. Rule and rest. It’s fun. I like the wine. Noble, ripe apples. I display kindness. I sleep with a beautiful young wife. I own a house on a river. A good bed. The simple pleasure of repose –

Suddenly, a hoarse screech from the darkness. Like an animal ... It's that girl, that outsider. She's already over the wall. They're above and below. Advancing.