

# The Morningside

By Téa Obrecht

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Long ago, back when everyone had gone, we lived in a tower called the Morningside at the same time as this woman named Bezi Duras — she seemed old to me then, but as I'm now approaching what was probably her age myself, I'm beginning to think she wasn't.

The people for whom the tower was built had all left the city, and the new apartments sat empty until someone at the top figured having a few units occupied might give the looters pause. My late father had served the city with some loyalty and brains, so my mother and I were allowed to move in at a greatly reduced price. When we walked home from the bakery at night, the Morningside loomed before us with just a few thin, lighted windows skittering up the black edifice like notes of a secret song.

My mother and I lived on the 10th floor. Bezi Duras lived on the 14th. We knew this because we sometimes got caught in the elevator when she summoned it and had to ride up and then interminably back down with her, and her powerful tobacco smell, and the three huge, barrel-chested black dogs who towed her around the neighborhood at sundown.

Small and sharp-featured, Bezi was a source of fascination for all. She had come to the city after some faraway war whose particulars nobody, not even my mother, seemed to fully grasp. Nobody knew where she'd gotten such fine clothes, or what connection she had managed to press to get herself into the Morningside. She spoke to the dogs in a language nobody understood, and the police came around every so often to check whether the dogs had finally overpowered and eaten her, as they were said to have done to some poor bastard who tried to rob her on one of her walks. The incident was only a rumor, of course, but it was enough for the building to begin petitioning her to get rid of the dogs.

“Well, that'll never happen,” my friend Arlo, who lived in the park with his macaw, told me.

“Why?”

“Because, honey, those dogs are her brothers.”

I was never under the illusion that Arlo meant this in some metaphorical sense. In fact, he'd heard it from the macaw, who'd heard it from the dogs personally. They had been beautiful boys once, charming and accomplished; but somewhere in the course of Bezi's journey from her homeland to ours, life made it impossible for them to accompany her in their God-given forms. So according to Arlo, Bezi had struck a bargain with some entity, who turned them into dogs.

“Those dogs?” I asked, thinking of their foam-coated jowls and furrowed faces.

“They do make an impression. But I guess that’s the point.”

“But why?”

“Well, they’re more welcome here than most people, honey.”

I gave Arlo a hard time about a lot of things, but I believed him about the dogs — mostly because I was 8 and felt his macaw incapable of telling a lie. Also, there was plenty of evidence to favor his theory. Those dogs ate better than we did. Every other afternoon, Bezi would come back from the butcher’s laden with paper bags, and afterward the whole building smelled of roasted bones. She never spoke to the dogs in anything louder than a whisper, and they walked in a tight V around her when they left the building every night, never to be seen until the next morning, when she would come hurrying along the dawn-reddened street behind them as though only a matter of seconds stood between her and the total unraveling of her life. Her apartment, four floors above, had the same floor plan as our own, and it was easy to picture the dogs roaming around her cavernous place, following her with their yellow eyes, snoring on the white painter’s tarp I always imagined covering the floor.

There were a lot of easily-deducible things people missed about Bezi. That she was clearly a painter was the most significant one. Her ornate jackets and fine leather boots were always splashed with color. It darkened her nail beds, speckled her eyelashes, so bright that it was easily observable from the tree I sometimes watched her from at the end of the block, and in which the dogs occasionally sniffed me out, surrounding the trunk and roaring with frustration until Bezi’s head finally appeared below, and she started in on me in that rickety language she had brought from home.

“You understand her, right?” I once asked my friend Ena, who had moved to New York from what I gathered was more or less the same place as Bezi.

“No,” said Ena scornfully. “It’s a completely different language.”

“It sounds similar.”

“Well, it’s not.”

Ena moved in with her aunt on the fourth floor only the previous year, after her family spent seven months at the quarantine depot, where Ena caught some illness — not the one for which she was being screened, mind you — and lost about half her body weight, so that when we walked down the street together, I felt obliged to tether her to me with one hand lest she blow away up the hill and into the river. She seemed unaware of her own smallness. She was grim and green-eyed, and had learned to pick locks in the camp (I always thought she meant camp as in summer camp; but she always called it the camp, which I eventually understood was different). Anyway, her lock-picking got us into parts

of the Morningside that were previously inaccessible to me: the basement pool, for instance, with its dry mermaid mosaics; or the rooftop, which put us at eye level with the dark parapets of midtown.

Ena's curiosity made her a natural skeptic. She didn't buy into all that stuff about Bezi Duras's dog brothers turning into men from dawn till dusk — even when I laid out all the evidence and played “Swan Lake” for her.

“Who turned them?” she wanted to know.

“What?”

“Who turned them into dogs for her?”

“I don't know — aren't there people who do that kind of thing, where you come from?”

Ena grew red. “I'm telling you, Bezi Duras and I don't come from the same place.”

All summer, this disagreement proved the sourest thing between us; impossible to reconcile, because it was dredged up every time Bezi set off down the street for the butcher's.

“What if we got into her place to see for ourselves?” Ena said one afternoon. “It wouldn't be hard.”

“But crazy,” I said, “since we know the place is guarded by a bunch of dogs.”

Ena smirked. “If you're right, though, wouldn't they actually be men?”

“Wouldn't that be worse?” I had the sense that men in such a state would almost certainly be naked.

The possibility of breaking in to Bezi's place would probably have continued to serve as a mere goad, had Bezi not paused where we were sitting on the park wall one bright afternoon and stared hard at Ena. “You're Neven's daughter, aren't you?” Bezi eventually said.

“That's right.”

“Do you know what they used to call your father, back where I come from?”

Ena shrugged in a practiced way. Nothing could move her: not her dead father's name, and not whatever Bezi said next in that language I couldn't understand. She just sat there with her thin little legs pressed against the wall. “Sorry,” she said when Bezi finally quieted. “I don't understand you.”

I suppose I should've known this would seal Ena's decision to break into Bezi's place. But I was naïve, and a little in love with her, and I had been there so often in my imaginary wanderings that it didn't seem all that remarkable when Ena pressed the up instead of down elevator button the following week. I believe I did say, "Let's not!" — only once, when Ena was already picking the lock, and only because I found myself sharply aware for the first time that we were, in fact, just kids.

The apartment was exactly the same as mine: still white hallways, a too-big kitchen with a marble countertop as thick as a cake. We followed the smell of paint into a parlor where a piano should have been. Leaning up against the wall there, surrounded on all sides by smaller canvases electric with color, stood the biggest painting I'd ever seen. The strokes were choppy and ragged, but the scene was easy enough to make out: a young woman was crossing a bridge from some little riverside town. Around her stood three empty spaces where the paint seemed to have been scrubbed away; presumably, I realized, this was where the dogs climbed out when they turned into their human form.

But they were not in their human form now. They were rousing themselves from a deep slumber where they lay sprawled out on that sure-enough paint-splattered tarp, sitting up one by one, as surprised, I think, to see us as we were to see them.

What would have happened had Bezi not come back at that exact moment, I really can't say. We probably would've ended up as one of those tragic statistics you read about in the paper that teach you what kind of being is safe and what kind is not.

"Well," Bezi said. "Neven's daughter. Twisted at heart — what a surprise."

"Go to hell," Ena said through her tears.

My mother never found out, and I guess Ena's didn't either. For years, that moment, known only to the three of us, was the first thing I thought about when I woke, and the last thing I thought about as I lay in the dark. I was certain I would revisit it every day of my life. And for a long time, even after we left the Morningside, I did. And then time passed, and eventually I did not. It would suddenly occur to me that a few days had gone by without my thinking about it — which, of course, would break my streak, and I'd feel relieved to find myself suddenly plunged back into that room, with its huge painting, and the dogs around it as though they were waiting to be called back into the world from which they had come. But then that got hazy, too. It became the kind of thing I'd tell lovers after deciding they would probably be sticking around. The kind of thing I hoped they'd forget about me when we parted ways.

By the time I stumbled on this story in the paper, I hadn't thought about it in years. A foreign painter of some celebrity died in the city last summer; the problem was, her body couldn't be retrieved because it was guarded by a pack of starving Rottweilers who would go wild if anyone so much as touched the door. Experts from all over the coast were brought in, but no one could find a command to subdue the dogs. It was decided that they should be shot, and a brave sniper was hoisted up on a window-washing rig for

that purpose. But when he peered inside, he saw only the lifeless old woman, lying with her hands crossed on a tarp at the foot of an enormous painting of a princess and three young men. What exactly was he supposed to shoot? "It's baffling," he told the reporter "but there's really nothing for me to do here." After he packed up, the police tried the door again; and sure enough the dogs came roaring back.

Finally, after about a week of this, a woman who worked across town showed up at the police station. "I used to live there," she said. "I can help." The reporter didn't name her but described her as rail-thin, with huge green eyes, so I know it was Ena who went up there one wild evening with what was left of the city gathered in the courtyard below; Ena who stood outside the door, whispering endearments of some bygone age, of some place that no longer existed, in that language she'd always known the dogs would understand, until she heard them move back from the door, and she turned the knob saying don't worry, boys, it's all right, it's all right, it's all right.

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