

A Day with Mr Jules

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An extract

Original title De buitenkant van meneer Jules
Publisher Vrijdag, 2004

Translation Dutch into English
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**What we did during our lives
makes us what we are when we die.
And everything, absolutely everything, counts.**

from The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying

The timeless half-hour between waking and rising embraces Alice like a familiar piece of clothing. Floating in an imaginary womb, she drifts towards a new day. Her body adapts effortlessly to the warm creases of the sheets, her muscles and joints weightless, her mind void. Jules's scent – a whiff of evaporated alcohol, nutmeg and old man – lies like a dark shadow behind her. He prepares breakfast as usual in the kitchen, his only contribution to the housekeeping for as long as she can remember. Every morning at eight o'clock sharp he begins his ritual. Alice gets up when the aroma of fresh coffee overshadows the smells of the night and when she has counted her blessings for long enough. She clambers up from her prone position and notices how the flesh around her hips and thighs pinches like an elastic band stretched too tight. Her shrunken breasts cling to her ribs. She knows these early-morning discomforts will disappear together with little twinges and by midday she will be in her former body once again. More or less.

It had snowed. Alice looked out the window at the street below bathed in a luminous white. She threw her bathrobe around her shoulders in an effort to capture the warmth of the bath in the blue towelling, then pulled the belt firmly around her waist and plunged her hands into her pockets. Bea, the downstairs neighbour, was standing in the yellowish beam of the streetlight clearing the snow from the pavement in front of the apartment building.

'Show-off,' mused Alice.

She stood there for a few seconds, listening to the alternating brushing and scraping of the broom and shovel. A distant commotion that failed to come closer. She shivered, and followed the scent of the coffee.

'It's snowed, Jules,' she said, to the back of her husband's head that protruded above the sofa. Usually he sat in the kitchen waiting for her, at a table that had been set according to his fixed pattern. But this time he didn't reply, and that elicited a smile from her. He must be staring

nostalgically at the snow, reminiscing about the past, when there were still real winters. Icy and cutting. She approached him slowly, hampered by her stiff knees. Impulsively she let her hand fall briefly onto his thin hair. She walked around the leather sofa, treading carefully, and sat down next to her husband. That he defied his own house rules to peer through the wall of glass and take in the snowy landscape made her feel tender towards him. And gave her an unexpected moment of freedom. She didn't have to start her chores right away.

She moved closer and felt the warmth of his shoulder next to hers, turned her head towards him slightly till the rough material of his sweater pricked her cheek.

'It's light and dark at the same time,' she said, smiling at their reflection in the big window.

Jules didn't reply. He just sat – motionless – next to her, hands on the sharp creases of his trousers. She heard the last drops of water dripping out of the coffeemaker in the kitchen, then the grand finale of steam and sighs. In the noisy silence that followed, reality hit her.

'Jules!'

Her voice burst out of her throat, a startled bird fluttering up out of the shrubs. She shook him and hit him but could get no life out of the stiff body.

'Jules!'

Another bird. This time a small, wary one.

He didn't react, just moved heavily together with her as she clawed at his shoulders. Jules was dead. She couldn't believe it but had to. He had died during her most blissful moment of the day, her womb-time. But not without doing his duty first. He had set the table and made coffee.

It struck her as odd that she had sat down beside him and that for all she had known, he had been alive. She had talked to him, thinking he would stand up and walk to the kitchen with her, sit down at the laid table. That thought calmed her. Jules would only really be dead if she felt it in her bones. Right now, the truth just throbbed on the surface, in her nerve endings. It only seeped in through her pores drop by drop.

'It's hard for the ones left behind,' she whispered. The superficiality of those ridiculous words comforted her for a moment. She laid her hand – still warm from the bed – over his. It felt cool. But not cold.

Of course they had talked about dying. Shared their fears about being reduced to relics of humanity. Jules always got very annoyed when she said she thought it wasn't a terrible thing to become senile. It struck her as a carefree existence. No more organizing to take care of, nurses patiently spooning the last bit of life into you, girlfriends from kindergarten and your first secret lovers showing up unexpectedly for visits. Especially that last bit always irked him. He had been her first lover, he had initiated her into life and love. Fifty years later he still couldn't stand jokes about apparent rivals.

'Think of the one left behind instead of yourself for a change,' he would say. 'Imagine you couldn't recognize me anymore. Or Herman. Or the grandchildren.'

Well, that was only a problem for the ones left behind, she contemplated. But that thought – utterly self-centred – she didn't voice. It struck her as so peaceful, disappearing, on death's doorstep, into a shroud of mist where memories slowly faded and sounds died out. She even thought it romantic, life being snuffed out in this way. Like the endings of French films, where colours break up into pastel-tinted vistas. *Fin!*

There had been times when she had fiercely longed not to acknowledge Jules. But he was branded into her flesh. He could never become invisible to her.

To die suddenly, without pain or fear – that would be his choice if there were one. The push of a giant hand on your back. No chance to brace yourself. The feeling a fly must have in that fraction of a second when a rolled-up newspaper looms above its paltry body. That was what Alice found hard for the ones left behind. And rude. To disappear from life without the slightest warning.

If Jules wouldn't let her become senile, she would opt for a profound and moving deathbed. Not too long. Not too short. She suppressed thoughts of pain and demeaning bodily affairs like diapers and bluish limbs. She would lie in a warm nightdress between freshly ironed sheets, hair rinsed silver-grey, nails manicured. She would be able to say everything to Jules that she had held back for fifty years. That she hated him and loved him. That she had sometimes wanted to leave him and was glad she had stayed. That she had wanted to be free, yet felt bound to him through every sinew. Things you don't say to each other against the backdrop of everyday worries. They would hold each other's hands and forgive each other – everything. His jaw would scarcely move under his now-sagging flesh, a sign for her to hold back. But in those exceptional circumstances he would control himself. He wouldn't get angry or blame her for anything. He would let her die in peace. Miss her already. Before she had even gathered the strength to breathe her last breath.

Alice became so caught up in her fantasy that, for a moment, she forgot she was now one of the ones left behind. When she realized the inevitable again, her eyes were filled with tears. She wiped her cheeks and tapped the back of Jules's hand with her wet hand. The chill of death was digging tunnels under his skin. She stood up and inhaled the white light that was shining in so mercilessly from outside, then sat down on the oak coffee table opposite her husband, undecided. She studied his face. His eyes were half-closed, like a child overcome by sleep in the midst of a game. Around his lips – did she imagine it or were they bluish? – danced the shadow of a smile. Had he felt the large hand on his back pushing him over the edge between life and death? Only then did she notice his spectacles lying on the floor. She picked them up, cleaned the lenses automatically on a corner of her bathrobe and gently slipped them back onto his nose.

Alice knew he hadn't suffered. That comforted her. She wondered if she should close his eyes. In films, she had seen next-of-kin close the eyelids with a gentle nudge of the thumb. She got up, went and stood next to Jules, put her hand over his face. She was trembling. Last summer she had found a little sparrow that had fallen out of its nest near the entrance to the building. She had taken it upstairs and held it in her hand, the only conceivable place to let it die. After one last shudder it was gone, but still encased in a warm downiness. The touch of Jules's eyelids and the almost imperceptible caress of his eyelashes against the palm of her hand awakened that little bird again. She withdrew her hand suddenly. She couldn't do it. The incredulity would disappear from his face if she did. She sat down on the coffee table again, and saw his startled, almost shy, expression that made him look young and vulnerable. She would just have to leave it.

As her glance descended once more, she noticed his stocking feet on the Persian carpet. She smiled. 'Oh Jules,' she said, shaking her head. 'Where are your slippers? Your feet will be ice-cold soon and you'll have bladder problems again.'

She walked to the bedroom, now also infused with that strange white light. The window should be opened – it was really Jules's job, but she did it herself this time. The effort echoed through her bones, setting off a chain reaction of confused thoughts. What was supposed to happen now? How would she get through the day without Jules? How would she live without him? She forced herself to think only of his leather slippers, then walked, searching, through the small apartment. Looked in the bathroom, and, knowing better, lifted the lid of the wicker laundry basket, her heart pounding in her throat. The utterly futile search for her dead husband's slippers kept her from bursting, overflowing her banks.

There they were, side by side, under the laid table. Directly under his plate. That's where he must have felt the first warning signal of the hand on his back, Alice surmised. He must have rushed to the sofa in his stocking feet before slipping over the edge into the abyss. She sat down in his chair, kicked off her slippers, pushed her feet into Jules's leather boats. They welcomed her into their warm interior the way they used to welcome Jules. The emotion that welled up through her legs and hips into her stomach prevented her from standing up for a moment. But she pulled herself together, shuffled to the living room and sat down opposite him again.

'I'll put your slippers on shortly, then have my breakfast,' she said to his surprised face. 'I'll drink your coffee for the last time. And I'll have to think, now that you won't be doing that for me anymore.'

She leaned towards him, the muscles in her thighs tensing painfully. It had to be done.

'Come on, give me a hand,' she prompted Jules. His left heel fit perfectly into her cupped right hand.

But his lifeless leg was leaden. Neither his knee nor his foot gave. Alice wouldn't acknowledge defeat. She sank to her knees on the small strip of carpet between the table and his legs, and pushed long enough till both slippers were on. Suddenly she let her hands slip down his trouser legs to embrace his legs. Her caress extended to just beneath his bony knees. His flesh emanated coolness, as if he had walked barelegged in the evening air. She lifted the hem of his trousers and noticed the bluish-white shadows that gave his skin the colour of skim milk. The same colour as her skin.

She pulled her hands back quickly and hid them in her pockets. Poured herself a cup of coffee in the kitchen, covered a slice of bread with apricot jam. She ate, stirred and swallowed, staring at the segment of over-illuminated world outside. Again she heard a commotion swell up in the distance. The alternating short and long scraping of someone clearing the pavement of snow. At least she wouldn't fall flat on her face when she went shopping later. Was she supposed to shop today? Was she ever supposed to shop again? She couldn't imagine herself alone between the supermarket racks without Jules there as a director. A nervous little laugh rose in her throat.

What was she supposed to do? Call a doctor? Call Herman? He would already have left for work by now. In that case she would get his wife Aimée on the line. Alice shook her head firmly. Herman must hear that his father was dead from her, not via a detour. Or was Aimée not a detour? She stood

up, poured herself another cup of coffee. It helped to keep at bay the panic that was beginning to stir again, this time directly below her stomach.

She opened the fridge door, remembering the contents more than she actually saw them. They were supposed to eat lamb chops today, with rosemary and garlic. Jules loved them. Yesterday he had put them into the shopping cart without consulting her. Alice could never completely banish the woolly little lambs from her thoughts and usually slid her portion onto his plate.

The billowy contours of a cauliflower loomed up in the crisper. The stale taste and dank smell of the kitchen always reminded her of the frugal war years. She wouldn't eat cauliflower today. And definitely not lamb chops. She threw the package of meat into the almost empty freezer, shivering as the cold blasted against her bathrobe. She hesitated for a moment, with two grey-green filets of sole in her hand, then exchanged them for a small package of shrimp. Two hundred and fifty grams. That afternoon she would eat every last one of them all by herself, she decided boldly. Later she would go to the supermarket and buy two luscious beefsteak tomatoes. Tomatoes overflowing with shrimp, that's what she felt like. She would make fries to accompany them and serve homemade mayonnaise. Her mother had taught her never to make mayonnaise or bread when she was having her period because nothing would turn out. Alice placed her hand on her belly and smiled. Her mayonnaise would turn out, and it would taste of the past too. And Jules wouldn't throw a wrench in things by adding a cheap little jar to her shopping cart. He thought it was stupid to get a cramp in your hand for those few pennies. He explained to her that raw eggs had salmonella bacteria in them and that they could kill you. Jules knew everything. But she wanted nothing to do with that today.

Alice cleared the table. It was done quickly: the cupboards, counter and table were no more than two feet apart. Meanwhile, thoughts organized themselves in her mind. First she would get washed and dressed, put lipstick on her dry lips, give new life to her collapsed hairdo with the tip of her comb. When she dressed in the morning, Jules always read the newspaper. Used to, that is. Yesterday. When she finished in the bathroom, she would pass through the living room with her duster, taking the same route, and with the same tired gestures as a conductor. In the meantime, Jules would read aloud any news worth mentioning. Trivia and human suffering interested her more than political intrigues and wars. His selection usually included snatched handbags, petty thefts and the odd murder. The closer the scene of the crime, the worse Alice found it. And the more scathing her opinion. You know what they should do with someone who breaks into the house of a helpless old woman? Yes, Jules knew. He would fold the rustling newspaper so as not to hear her litany of torture.

She decided to wear the same clothes as she had worn yesterday. A brown skirt and rust-coloured woollen cardigan she had knitted herself. It was a bit too tight around her breasts. She was so caught up with the prospect of an utterly normal day that she stopped suddenly in the door opening between the kitchen and the living room as if riveted to the ground. For a second she had completely forgotten Jules was dead. He was sitting there exactly as he had been half an hour earlier. But she could see that, while she had had her breakfast, the last bit of warmth had ebbed out of his body. Together with the last spark of life. Maybe it had occurred to him too that life had left him through his pores.

'Relax a bit, Jules,' she said. 'I'll get the newspaper right away.'

It was part of his morning ritual, not hers. But today, all the routines had to be broken. Jules never went downstairs before he had showered, dressed and shaved. Together they would

laugh at the tatty little neighbour ladies who came to collect their morning news in faded dressing gowns. And the men with striped pyjama legs peeking out from under their raincoats, wearing the smell of night like an aura. People have no manners today, they would say to each other.

Head down, she sniffed up her own body scent, then pulled the belt of her bathrobe firmly around her waist and sat down on the coffee table opposite Jules. She could have sworn he was smiling.

‘I’ll wear my coat over my nightclothes. And listen first to see if I hear any noises in the elevator,’ she assured him.

No one would notice she too had lost her good manners: she wouldn’t give anyone the chance to ask how the man of the house was doing.

A shadow passed over his apparent smile. Did he raise his eyebrows for a fraction of a second, or was she imagining it? She shook off the idea of the supermarket. She would just pretend she had tomatoes here this afternoon. She mustn’t walk around a shop by herself today. Everyone would ask about Jules, and what would she say then? That he was sitting at home dead on the sofa? He wasn’t dead as long as she told no one about it. He was alive for as long as she wanted it. She still had so much to say to him – it would surely come to her as the day passed. They would just have to leave her alone today.

She stood up, resolute, and impulsively stroked his cheek. She stiffened. He was ice-cold, his skin had turned to marble. It was as if the life ebbed out of her too. Sinking down next to him on the sofa, she pushed her face against the rough tweed of his shoulder. A dog begging for warmth. An unmistakable chill had taken possession of his body and seeped through his clothes. His male scent had vanished too. She missed that even more than his warmth. Soap, skin, coffee, faithful pet: gone. He sat there like a successful Madame Tussaud replica of himself. Alice cried, her tears soaking his shoulder pads and dripping onto his waxen right hand. As she stood up, she felt his body lean towards her slightly, then straighten up again.

She would just forget about the newspaper and go and lie next to Jules, head on his lap. She should make some phone calls, but she caught herself. If doctors, neighbours or undertakers busied themselves with her husband, she would lose him in less than an hour. Forever. They would carry him out of the apartment within the hour. In a coffin that she would have to point out in one of those albums. Surely she couldn’t let that happen?

She rushed to the little back room and pulled an old blanket out of the cupboard. She suddenly saw the chess game on the antique table, with all the pieces standing poised for a game.

David – shot through her head. She hadn’t given David a thought. He would be standing at the door at ten sharp for his chess game with Jules.

Blanket. Newspaper. Time of day. David. The four subjects tumbled over each other in her mind and gave her wings. She flew to the kitchen and saw on the clock that it wasn’t yet quarter to nine. The old blanket had once laid on the back seat of their first car, an elegant Fiat 1400 with round cheeks and a high back. She laid it over Jules’s knees.

‘There, dear,’ she muttered softly, ‘otherwise you’ll get much too cold.’

He appeared less dead now that she no longer saw his bluish-white hands with their network of hardened subterranean veins. She grabbed her navy-blue raincoat from the coat-rack in the hallway and threw it on over her bathrobe, at the same moment catching a glimpse in the mirror of three layers of material jostling around her knees. She threw her head searchingly into the corridor, onto which another apartment opened. A young working couple lived there. By now they would have been stuck in the morning traffic for some time already. She pressed the worn-down elevator button into which her finger fit perfectly, heard the first mechanical groans and sighs. She whizzed six floors down in the square cubicle, clinging to the bunch of keys in her coat pocket as if to a life buoy.

The lobby, which seemed over-illuminated because of the snow, was deserted. A path of wet footprints etched itself across the marble floor. Alice looked at her own slipper-shod feet, her thin, bluish ankles. She would die if someone saw her like that. The newspaper stuck out of the mailbox – she didn't even have to open the little door. That saved time. Fortunately, the elevator had waited for her and within a few seconds she was standing in front of her door again.

Fingers trembling, she turned the key in the lock and stepped inside. Into her private domain. Breathless and numb.

'I'm taking a bath, Jules, even if it isn't Wednesday. I'm frozen,' she said, placing the newspaper on his lap.