FLANDERS LITERATURE

Congo Blues

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When Morgan headed home from De Graaf's Bakery at around seven in the morning on New Year's Day, he found her slumped against the wall garden of Smolders' Bike Shop. Her knees were tucked up, her arms, folded, rested on them, her head lay on her arms. She was wearing a short dress and black nylon stockings, high-heeled shoes with ankle bands, a heavy coat, and a black cap stitched with a word ending in '-onix'. Despite the cold she was not wearing gloves. Angela. He recognized her at once. Her shoulders, her hands—even with the passage of years she had hardly changed, the way she sat there against the ivy, waiting for him.

The street that ran parallel to the railroad tracks was deserted; half the city was still celebrating the start of the new year, the other half was already sleeping it off. In the distance you could hear the maneuvers in the train station, and the sound of a diesel-powered water pump. As usual, the air hung heavy with the stench of brown coal mixed with the scent of nocturnal merrymaking.

Morgan continued on his way without looking back at her, surprised, presuming she had perhaps overdone it on New Year's Eve, as one might expect from her, but after fifty meters he turned and went back. There were enough stories in the newspaper about alcoholics who had succumbed to the cold on a park bench. Every year a few drunks froze to death. He bent over and tapped her shoulder. Frail, sagging shoulders that made for a depressing sight, despite the heavy black coat which concealed them. One hand was clamped about her knee, the other hand was clenched shut, as though she were hiding something from him. Did she want to surprise him? Was she hiding the thimble she would sometimes stroke his back with at night? Or the tuning fork that she always made vibrate in places where only he was allowed to lay his ear and listen? She did not respond. A few wheat-blonde locks, the hair he had so often ran his fingers through, stuck out from under the cap.

'Hello?' Her breathing was calm.

It began to snow. 'Hey,' he said with the soothing voice of an unflappable man, 'should I call an ambulance?'

No response. He lived a few doors down, a hundred meters from where she slumped. His rented room on the second floor of a townhouse was so small he hardly ever had visitors. The thought of 'having visitors' alone was laughable. He had scraped together bits and pieces from thrift stores and flea markets: a low plastic coffee table, a yellow leatherette sofa, a bed with the kind of multicolored chassis one sometimes saw in cult films, a table whose paint was peeling, four unmatched chairs, a wardrobe. And next to the piano, a rack of LPs comprehensively spanning the music of the past twenty years. It was a neighborhood where houses were still affordable, doubtless

due to the noise of the nearby railway tracks, that typical kedunk, kedunk, kedunk of travelers on their way somewhere. Smolders maintained that the neighborhood was much quieter since the factory closed down, that there were fewer trains, that the biggest problem was now the plague of stray cats and the crack house down the way.

'Hello?' he repeated, a little louder now. 'It's snowing. You can't stay sitting here like this.'

Still no reaction. Leave her to her fate? He couldn't bring himself to do it. He pictured tomorrow's newspaper headline: 'Young Woman Found Frozen To Death. Neighbors Claim Ignorance.' 'You too, sir?' The little red light above the camera, the microphone at chest height, he could just see it. He set the bag of bread on the ground, slid his hands under her armpits and hoisted her upright. Despite the early hour, she reminded him of a stack of wind-dried laundry, the same exact smell as in the old days. She was thin and slightly taller than he, and when she felt his hands around her waist she folded her arms around him. It must have been an instinctive reaction, like a knee jerk when the doctor hit it with a mallet.

He managed, with much difficulty, to get her up the stairs without dropping either her or the bread, and without waking the other residents of the house. She almost slid out from under him while he felt for his room key. Soon she was lying on his bed, and almost immediately she turned on her side and tucked up her knees. He removed her shoes and her cap too, and found the confirmation of her steadfast character in the blonde hair that turned out to be much longer than under the cap, the unblemished white skin, the thin eyebrows, the fine lips with traces of lipstick in the corners, the sharp nose, and the line on her left cheek, undoubtedly a depression from where her face had pressed against her coat. The cold had left a pale pink tint on her cheeks, and her slender fingers had gone red as well, the piano fingers that so often had glided over the upper register, he himself taking the lower octaves. What surprised him most was the carelessness with which she lay there on the bed. A fledgling who had tumbled out of its mother's nest too soon, that's what she reminded him of. She breathed deeply. No scent of alcohol. He took a blanket from the cupboard and laid it over her.

Just has he planned to turn and finally sit down to breakfast, or call the emergency services, or sit looking out the window at the snowflakes and decide what would to do with her, an envelope slid to the floor. A simple, white, business-format envelope, no postage stamps or addressee or return address, but much thicker than the letters he usually received—although he never received letters, only bills. He bent over and picked it up. The envelope wasn't sealed. It contained four bundles of ten-thousand-franc notes; on the wrapper around one of the bundles he read: 25x10,000 Belgian francs. Four bundles, 100 ten-thousand-franc notes, one million francs, in a plain white envelope, in the coat pocket of a twentysomething woman who had fallen asleep on the street, against a wall, in the snow. New Year's Eve, he thought, of course, everyone needs some spare cash. She was fast asleep, didn't notice a thing. He noticed that the coat pocket where the money had fallen from had a button closure, and he did assumed that somewhere between Smolders bike shop and his bedsit the button had come undone. He closed the envelope, put it in the coat pocket and fed the button through the buttonhole.

Morgan knocked and right away a man's voice from the other side of the door called for him to come in. He entered a spacious office, in the middle of which stood an immense Louis XIV-style desk and on it, a half-meter-high stack of paper. On the wall hung two painted portraits, likely of the mayor's predecessors. It was the room with the balcony, and in front of the window, the Belgian tricolor flapped against the flagpole. Vleminckx looked seventy, he had combed his white hair straight back and wore a sporty dress shirt with a handkerchief tucked in the breast pocket. A sharp face, broad forehead, pointy chin and reticent eyes. He had rolled up his shirtsleeves despite the chill in the room. He looked up from his papers, lay his pen calmly on the tabletop and leaned back.

'Do sit down. How can I help you?' he asked with a voice that reminded Morgan of the bark of a Labrador.

Morgan said he was looking for information about a certain Romain Du Bois. The mayor sat up straight, unscrewed the cap of his pen, thought long and hard, as though delving through his old memory to place the combination of given name and surname, but in the end shook his head.

'Romain Du Bois? No, the name doesn't ring any bells. Rien du tout. Can you be a little more precise?'

He gestured once again for Morgan to take a seat in one of the two chairs across from him.

Morgan sat down and asked: 'Simona Du Bois? ... Simona Tremblay?'

'Sorry, no.'

'Walter Du Bois? Walter Tremblay? Marianne Tremblay?'

At each name, the mayor thought for a moment, but then said: 'Never heard of them.'

'Lillian de Hemptinne? Or her husband André?'

'No, I'm sorry.'

Morgan then tried the names of his foster parents and showed him a photo of Simona he had found at Lily's, but each time the mayor shook his head.

'Have these people wronged you in any way? Do their live here in the village?' he asked, then added: 'No, then I would certainly know them.'

Was he being intentionally unhelpful? Morgan had that impression, and, changing his tack, he smiled and said: 'I'm writing a book about Congolese independence.'

At once Vleminckx's expression changed. 'Aha, l'indépendance,' he said, deliberately and barely audible. 'But you're still so young.'

Morgan thought it better not to answer. The man must have seen the desperation on Morgan's face, because he added: 'You must be the fourth or fifth journalist, I've lost track by now, wanting to talk to me about the Congo since I left. But I haven't been able to help anyone. One forgets, you understand.'

'I don't want to take up your time, just ask a few questions, if you...'

'By all means, with pleasure. Go ahead.'

'I found documents in the National Library's archives mentioning your name. At that time you were in...'

'Bukavu,' the mayor said.

'Exactly. Bukavu.'

'Bukavu, yes, yes. I spent nine years there.'

Morgan's goal was to keep his cool, not to panic, and listen calmly to what Vleminckx had to say. And maybe ask the occasional question, more to keep the conversation going than to steer it in a new direction. Maybe he would say something that would jog Morgan's memory.

'Ah, *l'indépendance*,' the man sighed. 'A pity you didn't come a few weeks ago.'

Morgan wanted to reply that coming too late was the story of his life, but the man continued: 'This morning I attended a funeral in a village near here. A man who could have perhaps told you everything you wanted to know about that period. He who was in the thick of

things, and knew everyone in the country personally. He had a bar. Saturday was a popular dance evening.'

He ran his fingers through his hair.

Morgan asked: 'A colleague of yours?'

'More than that. A friend.'

He was clearly fighting back his emotions.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' Morgan said.

'Oui, c'est triste. The past is vanishing. It disappears without a sound. With no more than a puff.'

Afraid the mayor would burst into tears, Morgan asked: 'Were you already there before independence?'

'Before and after. What can I tell you about that cursed independence? I went back recently. The first thing they asked me was: "L'indépendance, patron, ça terminera quand?" When will it be over? I guess that says it all, doesn't it?

'I understand what you mean,' Morgan said, although he did not understand at all.

The man paused for a moment and then said: 'I usually take my lunch in the restaurant across the street. May I invite you to join me?'

It was just past eleven o'clock. Morgan wasn't hungry, but he went with him to the café where he had drunk a cup of coffee an hour earlier.

'I tend to lunch early to beat the afternoon crowd,' the mayor said once they were seated at a table by the window. 'The villagers know they can find me here around this time. A habit I also followed down there. We got up at six. By eleven we couldn't take it any more.'

The proprietress promptly brought a carafe of red wine and asked: 'Two daily specials?'

'Fine,' Vleminckx answered without consulting Morgan.

After pouring them both a glass of wine he asked: 'What exactly is your book about?'

'Life in the time around independence.'

The man nodded, but before Morgan could add anything he began dishing up disconnected anecdotes about his nine years in the former colony. Morgan's sole impression was that his time there had been dominated by love affairs.

The proprietress brought two bowls of soup and wished them bon appétit.

'Did you ever go to the diamond mines?' Morgan asked.

The man shook his head and answered that the mines did not fall under his jurisdiction. He had only been a low-ranking civil servant. The mines took their orders directly from Brussels. Those with no authority in the mines were not welcome there.

'Everything was possible in Congo,' he said. 'Every rule had an exception. L'exception, c'était le règle.'

'I've heard that truckloads of diamonds were transported over the border,' Morgan said.

'Ah well, that's Congo too. Frankly, if I could give you some advice: don't believe everything they say about Congo.'

A man with a thin moustache approached and asked if he could interrupt. The discussion concerned a field with a road running through it but which had been made impassable by the owner of a neighboring property. After fobbing off the man with the promise to look into the matter, Vleminckx said: 'Troubles with a field. How many hours did I spend with this kind of thing back in Congo? A never-ending rigmarole about fields. The one fellow's cow having eaten the other man's grass.'

Morgan suddenly wondered if Vleminckx could be trusted, if he had ever really been in Congo or just sat here in this restaurant making it all up.

'What actually happened,' he asked, 'with the children of Congolese mothers and Belgian fathers?'

The man was not at all surprised at Morgan's question.

‘They went to Save,’ he answered, without the least hesitation. ‘To the White Nuns. Les Soeurs Blanches d’Afrique.’

‘Where?’

‘Save. Near Butare, Rwanda. On the far side of the lake.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. Those men couldn’t raise their children themselves. Often they already had a family with a Belgian wife, and naturally she did not want her brood associating with half-siblings.’

Vleminckx wiped his mouth, studied Morgan with sudden interest, and added: ‘And then, after independence, into the airplanes they went. Adopted by a Belgian family. To prevent the Belgian genes from running wild once civilization had departed.’

‘The white children were allowed to stay with their mother.’

‘Yes. What do you want—that’s just how things went back then.’

He sounded apologetic.