# Tuesday

## Elvis Peeters

### An extract

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Now I need to listen carefully, he thinks, now I need to listen carefully, the first ray of light has already forced its way through the chink, the second ray of light has already forced its way through the chink, the sun must be travelling over the roof, it must be.

He hadn't seen the first ray of light, he had felt it when it crept across his cheek.

Afterwards he'd opened his eyes for a second.

Then he had seen the second ray of light falling through the chink. He'd shut his eyes again at once, because now I have to listen carefully, he'd thought, as he did every morning.

He pricks up his ears under the covers to see whether he can hear her. A rustling, a fluttering, a waft of air, a little cooing perhaps, how would she announce herself this time?

Whatever it is, he will recognise it, as he does every morning.

I have all the time in the world, he thinks, she'll come when the time is right, not before, I will notice, I haven't been wrong yet. She won't let me down, I'll hear her tripping along, moving carefully along the rafters as she does.

I sleep under the roof, in the attic, it's the highest I can get in this house. It is cramped but pleasant here, it's an old house, it smells stale and there is straw sticking through the roof tiles. The straw has been there for years. Nobody knows I sleep here, nobody needs to know, if anybody finds out, the girl from social services will stick her nose into the affairs of the house, that's the way it goes. I heard it from others, when there were still others with whom I discussed such things, he thinks, and waits until he hears what he knows he must hear.

But there is still silence.

Because she is allowing me to rest, he thinks, because she knows I am tired, even early in the morning, as though I've been out partying all night, that's how tired my legs feel. While all I've done is lie in bed, climbed the two staircases yesterday to get here, up to the attic.

He keeps his eyes closed until he is certain she has landed.

Hey, are you there? He'll say when it is time. I was just beginning to get cold.

The draft plays between the gaps in the rafters and the pantiles.

I need to get hold of some new straw, he thinks, the summer's coming, I can cut stalks of wheat and dry them. Maybe I should do that later today, once I've got up.

Let me listen a while first, to her landing on the roof and finding her way. I'll open my eyes and start my day. I'll throw off the covers, look at the light that will have truly found me by then, not just a few rays but a full glow that illuminates all the objects in the room.

His jacket and trousers hang patiently on a nail next to the door. He knows the slightly threadbare, rather baggy angles of the trouser legs where his knees go and the sagging material of the jacket sleeves his elbows rub against.

The chair is next to the door, directly underneath the nail with the jacket and trousers. There are socks on it. His shirt hangs over the back. It looks clean, light blue, the buttons shine. Apart from the second to the top which is duller. Perhaps because I rub it more, he thinks; because I open it and close it more often, I've rubbed off the shine.

On the right front side of the shirt, between the row of buttons and the breast pocket, there is a stain, it's inconspicuous, a little spilled milk. It is not an outrageous stain, if the light falls differently you can't even see it, a tiny spot which makes the cotton a shade darker. Perhaps the shirt should be washed, he thinks, as he has for days; there is still a pile of crisp clean shirts in the wardrobe.

If I replace it, I'll wear a blue one again, I have hardly any shirts in another colour, a white one to go with my suit, but that was a long time ago and there are no opportunities to wear a suit on the horizon, perhaps the next time will be when I'm dead, the girl from social services, or whoever takes it upon themselves to lay me out, will probably decide to dress me in my suit.

Next to the chair is the white enamel metal chamber pot with a blue rim which he took when his mother died. It was the only thing amongst all her belongings which seemed to him worthwhile taking. Part of the enamel on the bottom is cracked, there's a small mark, but no rust, even though the crack has been there for thirty years. The pot is indestructible, he is sure of it. There's a drop of bleach in the bottom. When he lifts the lid, he can smell it throughout the room. Sometimes before he gets into bed, he will deliberately lift up the lid and the room will smell of disinfectant.

His slippers are next to the bed on the rug that he bought at a flea market over a year ago. It is an ochre-coloured, deep pile rug, pleasantly soft and warm under his feet. He laid it down with care. It took him three goes to carry it up the stairs, the rolled carpet on his shoulder, he was tired but not breathless, he'd carried much heavier things than that in his life, but it weighed down like he was carrying a corpse to the attic. He no longer had the strength of former times, when he was young but old enough to carry a grenade launcher or a gun.

He'd once had good vision, had never needed glasses, been a good marksman, accurate. Every now and then he thinks back to that time, perhaps because he has little more to do than reflect on his life. It happens a lot when he is waiting, like now, in the peace and quiet. It is not

deep reflection, more like the summoning up of scenes, moods, like flicking through a photo album, there are no analyses, no opinions, it is all behind him, related to his life only and not to the course of world history. It has always been like that, right from the start, reflecting deeply on it is a waste of energy.

In the meantime she has arrived, I heard her; she landed and knew where to find me.

The day begins, he thinks and he pushes off the covers, a composed manoeuvre, slow like everything he does. He used to throw off the covers with a powerful sweep of the arm, instantly exposing himself, letting the light hammer his body. Now the light caresses him as he cautiously sits on the edge of the bed, his feet comfortable on the carpet, feeling for his slippers, a nest for each foot, that's what they look like, old nests, worn down, the wool inside rubbed into hard lumps, horny like his feet, and sour with sweat.

He washes his feet twice a week, it's their turn again tomorrow. It is just a habit, he doesn't get dirty anymore. But today he might, if he goes in search of straw for between the roof tiles.

Or grass I could dry, that's easier to find in the city.

I could spend the entire afternoon that way, he reflects, it's still quite a long walk, along the Diepestraat, right to the end, then a diagonal right, up the incline of the shopping street, what's it called again, with the laundrette on the corner? I often stand there looking through the window at the two or three women who are always busy there or sit talking, mainly East European, sometimes a black one, I still think I can tell whether the black women come from the Congo or not, but I never ask, I just look, that's enough. Occasionally one will be wearing a brightly coloured cloth, but high heels and tights can't hide their hips and buttocks.

Past the laundrette at the top of the street there's an undeveloped plot, I'll definitely find grass there. Further along, after the bend, I'll pass a small alleyway between the houses. There might be a cornfield there. There used to be, it won't be any different now, the world doesn't take its corners that fast.

There is a good drawknife amongst the stuff in my toolbox, the one with the black wooden handle, in the calf's leather sheath. I remember rubbing it with fat and wrapping it up in butter paper years ago, I had it sharpened again. When I put it away I thought I might never need it again.

The knife comes from Italy, it was made for shepherds, I bought it at the market in Cosenza because the saleswoman was so charming. She let me kiss her and fondle her in the truck I had. I spoke broken Italian which I based on French, as I had done in the Congo with the Congolese language, modelling the one on the other, because if I have learned anything it is that the language is not what's important but knowing how to convey what you want.

She wanted to go to Rome or even Brussels if needs be, but I didn't want that. The only thing I took with me was the knife. The saleswoman had come along too soon, when I got to know Erna, I noticed much of the Italian in her, only Erna was ten years older.

He raises himself up without finishing his stream of thought, thoughts come and go, daydreams, reflections, minor resolutions, like a merry-go-round, a ritual, seventy-six year-old archive, disorganised, cluttered, uncontrollable.

He will finish the thought another time. Now he has to get dressed, go downstairs, make coffee, smoke a cigarette.

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Once I had picked up a gun it was difficult to put it down again. I was sent on missions, but could decide myself how I went about completing them.

We mercenaries understood discipline, but as an army we weren't a tight outfit.

I didn't have anything against the people I was fighting. I didn't blame them for firing on me, I just wanted to be the one who hit the targets.

Nobody knew who was waging war on whom, which power, which area or which interests were involved.

I fought in Tshombe's mercenary army against the United Nations Blue Helmets. Our airplanes startled them, they were amazed we had an air force. The Dorniers weren't exceptional, but we did some damage with the Fouga Magisters.

The Blue Helmets destroyed all the airplanes.

We were surprised at the airport. All of a sudden there were Swedes, Ethiopians, Nepalese, and Americans. The Blue Helmets ambushed us in our barracks. Before I could arm myself, a rifle butt whacked my chin. My teeth rattled, my pearlies would be stronger for it.

We were herded into a warehouse and interrogated.

I felt feverish, my jaw looked grey.

On the way to military hospital, I was able to outwit my guard, a friendly Swede. I knew the surroundings better than he did, I knew how to escape.

We were done with the planes. I went to the enemy lines on the ground with Tshombe's army, to the villages.

And after Tshombe's defeat I retreated to Kivu, and after that I hooked up with Pierre Mulele's Simbas, and after that with a nameless rebel faction with a French mercenary leader. There was choice enough.

The Kivu mission was easy. The remaining planters had set up their own army of white mercenaries. At least, that was what I understood. It didn't interest me. I heard that they were looking for someone to patrol Lake Kivu. I told them I'd served on a boat on Lake Tanganyika, that I'd sailed down the Kasai, that as second helmsman, I been along the Congo until Leopoldville, but they didn't need to hear that much.

I was given a boot whose skipper had succumbed to malaria. I was going to get a mate, a miner's son from Charleroi, but he disappeared before coming on board, eaten by crocodiles perhaps, or vermin in the local brothel, everything was possible, so I just left.

They were peaceful months.

I sailed steadily backwards and forwards between two bays. First it took me two hours from one bay to the other. I'd sail back straight away. I scanned the banks, sometimes using the binoculars which the planter had given me. Usually my bare eyes sufficed.

There was nothing worrying to be seen. No movements of troops, no armed gangs, no spies. Occasionally the people who lived along the river banks, that was all.

After a week it took me three hours and later almost four to travel from one bay to the other. While fighting and murder was rife inland, my life on the water was calm like a fisherman's.

In the evenings I moored the boat and slept on it. I survived on the provisions and fuel the planters supplied me with.

At night it was impossible for rebels or fighters to go out on the lake because of the treacherous currents and crocodiles. Moonlight was not enough.

After a couple of weeks I gave up spying. I didn't care who wanted to sail on the lake or reach Idjwi island or the opposite riverbank. None of the rival parties could count on my support.

Sometimes I sailed close to the banks, which was dangerous because of the rocks and underwater projections, but I knew how to avoid them skilfully. The Oostender had taught me more than he could have suspected.

Close to the riverbank, I could easily watch the monkeys and birds in the trees, and I would try to get close to a hippo or the crocodiles that lay sunning themselves in the mud. I listened to the screeching of the monkeys and the birds that sometimes rose up from the heart of the jungle like a storm through leaves. The crocodiles didn't bat an eyelid. The hippos waddled away from the bank. I let the boat float.

I was on that boat because I was taking part in a war, but the tumult of battle was absent, no one bothered me.

I dismantled the automatic weapon they had given me, polished every part with a cloth. I watched the components glistening in the sun of the tropics, rendered unusable, the gun lying there in separate parts, spread out, mixed up, like the Congo itself. Only I knew how to put the gun back together again, something no one seemed to know about the Congo.

Sometimes one of the locals would set out in a proa to fish.

I left them alone. I didn't ask difficult questions, which side they were on, if they knew anything about the war or the advancing armies.

I took a holiday.

It was pleasant on the water. The repose of a crocodile in the mud.

After ten weeks they said I'd be relieved, I could join a mission inland. I didn't feel like it. I would rather have a new uniform, a new company, different air.