

THE STARS ABOVE THE CITY

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The piano was old. The lid shut, smeared with dust. Thin light cut into the foyer from the bay beyond. Anthony had spent months dreaming of the Intercontinental. Its green shuttered terraces looking down onto the port. He had arrived at the site of one of his dreams.

A porter appeared and picked up his rucksack. It was light and the man smiled. He indicated that Anthony should follow him. The hotel opened out along wide corridors. He noticed with some disappointment that the carpets were worn, and there were prints of palaces on the walls and an English huntsman with hounds. The room was on the second floor. It opened onto a balcony guarded by iron railings. He looked out over the bay, which curved away to the south. There were fishing boats out beyond the headland. The porter was waiting in the room. Anthony fumbled in his pocket. He only had euros. The man smiled. He passed him two euros.

‘Euros are good here.’

He waited for the stillness of the room to reach him. He wasn't quite ready to face the city again, but he had promised a man at the port who claimed to be a good guide – ‘official, sir’ – to meet him at 5 p.m. There was enough time to sleep. He tried to imagine himself back, as the sounds

of the port rose up past the balconies. Gulls, lorries reversing, a ship leaving. The sounds of a world moving.

He woke to a loud knocking at the door. He spun, unsure of the room. His hands grasping at the sheets. Then his memory caught him. He waited as his heart calmed. There was a knock again.

‘Monsieur, your guide?’

He was aware of his crumpled trousers and shirt as he answered the door. He blinked at the porter. The sun was hurting his eyes.

‘*Dix minutes, d’accord?*’

The porter smiled and turned away.

The medina proved more than expected. More than he had read about. He didn’t realise that a return to the past could be so swift. A surge of life swept into him. The flux of people, living, eating, working in the shaded passages cut out of what seemed the solid life of the city. He had a few offers of things he didn’t need but the guide seemed to deflect most of the attention. He appeared to know many of the people who smiled at him. It seemed he had been telling the truth about being an official guide. The guide’s name was Mohammed. At least it was one of his names. Anthony suspected he had used it as the easiest one a European might pronounce. He was an old man. Over sixty with tight-cut silver hair. He wore a well-tailored suit and carried an umbrella to protect himself from the sun. He kept it furled in the medina but carried it with a quiet grace that seemed to protect him from the rush of the city.

Mohammed recommended a restaurant and waited while Anthony was served a ‘traditional meal’. He was the only customer of the restaurant.

‘You are too early for dinner and too late for lunch, but we’ll serve you anyway,’ the waiter laughed.

The tour continued after the meal.

‘It is quiet in the afternoon. Evenings are better. Now people rest. But I will take you to an emporium.’

At the emporium he was introduced as ‘Mr Anthony’, as if they should know who he was. A silver tray carrying a heavily sugared glass of mint tea was presented to him. He sipped delicately. He wasn’t sure of the etiquette. There must be an etiquette. He was invited to sit down as the theatre of carpets was revealed to him. A thrilling display of four different types of rug and carpet was presented by a tall lithe man in a black singlet. His muscles flexed as he unfurled each new display. The commentary was provided by the head of the emporium. Anthony kept his eyes down, trying not to give himself away. He wanted to buy a carpet. It would look good in the flat. There was more space now. He wondered what Jac would have done. Anthony had never been good with salesmen. They sensed a weakness in him. A desire to please. To be helpful almost whatever it cost him. He looked at the man in the vest. There was a sheen on his skin from the heat even in the cool of the emporium. But he knew he simply couldn’t buy a carpet on his first day. He bought a blanket. It was the cheapest woollen item in the shop. The man who had served him the tea shook his head sadly as he took his money. He could sense that what Anthony really wanted was a full-scale, two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand knot, five-hundred-euro carpet. Jac always said he wasn’t assertive enough, didn’t make demands. Anthony had always found when he made demands he lost things, friends, lovers. He had lost Jac. Jac would have bartered the carpet down to two hundred euros and made the salesmen feel he was doing them all a favour by buying it from them.

He paid the guide off after the third carpet shop.

He followed one of the alleyways back to centre of the medina. It was a Sunday night and children were playing football in the small spaces between the houses. As he walked he had glimpses of lives he could never see in the veiled portals, warm kitchens, the flavours of food high in the air.

He remembered their kitchen in Cardiff. He had loved to fill it with recipes from countries he had never visited as if with alchemy he could produce them to share on order. He loved the programmes on the television that told you how to eat and live. He liked that. He liked the surety of it.

The night was beginning to fold around the city. He walked down the Petit Socco. The chairs were filled with dark men looking out at the moving street, just looking. A shudder went through him. He found a chair at Café Tingis. He looked out. Watching. Men in hooded gowns. Women clothed tightly against the world of men, pale Europeans in the coloured clothes of the young and rootless.

A waiter brought him a coffee. He had asked for it in French. He could order food in French. It was a small miracle of his education that he could actually remember words from a classroom twenty years before. The evening filled in the spaces. He began a postcard in his mind. Dear Jac. On the Petit Socco, you would like it here... Dark men with smiles in their eyes. I'm speaking French badly again... sorry, bad French.

Jac had always laughed at his pronunciation. He would write the postcard in the morning. He should be able to get stamps in the city.

A man in a white shirt smiled at him from the crowd. Anthony smiled back. The man waved and began walking towards him.

Sun filtered into the room early. He remembered the bar he had been persuaded to try for one drink. Hardwood, dusty sawdust floor. The smell of hashish. He checked his face. No marks. He could walk away from this.

He packed quickly. The man at the reception took his money without comment. They had refused his credit card, so he'd been forced to withdraw money from a cashpoint. He walked back up the Petit Socco, through the medina to the new town. It had been new in the 1920s when the French had

planned it. There was a Café de Paris, and Café de France, along a Boulevard Pasteur. He was tight with sweat from the climb up the hill with his rucksack. There were no offers in the early morning. It was too early for business. He settled into a dark leather chair and withdrew into an order for black coffee with a croissant. He had always liked croissants since his first visit to Paris as a sixteen-year-old. To him they tasted of opportunity and a delicious sense of guilt in the morning. He had visited the *cimetière* with Jonathan. He was rather horrified when Jonathan produced a lipstick from his pocket, covered his lips with the darkest red and kissed the statue above the grave they had both come to see. He had heard Jonathan stayed in Newcastle after university. They had kept in touch for a few years. It seemed a long way back now.

He wrote a postcard to Jac. It didn't say anything. He signed it, *With love from Anthony, Always.*

The bus was half-full. He had expected it to be old and battered, but it was new with good seats and air conditioning. He sat next to a man who spoke good English. He was going to Chefchaouen. He worked for the Banc de Maroc. He was going to explain a new computer system to the manager in Chefchaouen. He usually travelled by train, but there was no train to Chefchaouen. Anthony was glad of the information. The man had two children. His wife was expecting a third. Life was good. You worked hard, you enjoyed life. What did Anthony do? Anthony wasn't sure about that. I write – write what? For the television. Films? No. Not films. I write down ideas for television. Shows. Programmes. You get paid for that? Usually. Are they popular? They don't usually get made – I just come up with the ideas.

The man looked at him. He wrote ideas for shows that never got made.

The open fields passed the windows. Men riding donkeys, sunflowers about to open, a grey reservoir. Travel made him think of home. His work. Jac.

He had started writing plays for the theatre. They had been well received. He was young and the reviewers were generous in small papers. He would get better, write better plays with more complex plots. But he didn't get better. He found that after the third he had very little more to say. He worked for television instead. He wrote treatments for new shows that went into development or were offered to digital channels that no one watched. It had allowed him to live for six years in the city he had shared with Jac. It had paid for holidays to Barcelona and New York. It had never felt like much money. But he was happy. Jac was with him. They had partied. They had friends around to dinner. He felt like he was living the life he had wanted as that sixteen-year-old in Paris.

That was nine months ago. Before the money came. A treatment had been made into a show. It was called *Fantasy Shop*. It allowed people to indulge. That was its hook. It had been franchised. He had had to employ an agent, and the agent had employed a lawyer on his behalf. He had earned money. A lot of it, very quickly. There was still a cheque for \$260,000 due to be paid. His accountant had suggested waiting until the new financial year to accept payment. His tax bill had frightened him. Surely he couldn't be giving that much money away in tax? Where would he get it from? The accountant had reassured him. Then Jac had left him.

The man took out pictures of his two healthy children. Their bright eyes stared out at the bright lights in the photographer's studio. He noticed they were well lit. The photographer had known how to light children, how to get the best from their youth and clear skin. A kind of hopefulness.

The bus stopped at a service station on the brow of a hill. The man from the bank invited him to share a table.

'My name is Abdul. Yours?'

'Anthony.'

'As in Cleopatra, yes?'

Anthony looked blankly at the man.

‘The play. Shakespeare?’

‘Sorry, of course. I was... a bit out of context.’

The station was crowded, full with families and travellers. The man from the bank had a certain stature that Anthony found attractive. He seemed at ease. A waiter arrived promptly to take their order. Abdul switched into Arabic to order his food. There was a rush of words Anthony found strangely familiar. The sound of the language was rather beautiful. The two men then looked expectantly at him. There was no menu: the butchered side of a cow hung down from the rafters next to the kitchen. Anthony didn’t eat meat. He had given up meat five years before on one of Jac’s fad diets. But he had surprised himself and stuck to it, which was more than Jac did.

‘The fish is very good. Trout.’

Anthony was grateful for the advice. He smiled up at the waiter.

‘*Un poisson, un café au lait, s’il vous plaît.*’

The waiter retreated to the kitchen.

‘*Parlez-vous français?*’

‘*Non. Un peu.*’

‘It is a fine language. I lived in Marseille for two years. Before I was married of course.’

‘You were able to travel there?’

‘To work, yes. *La vie est très cher làbas.*’ He looked at Anthony and then added. ‘Otherwise it is too expensive.’

‘You didn’t think of staying?’

‘No. Why should I? My family is here. I was a young man. I wanted to see another country, that is all.’

The fish arrived. It was grilled dark under a fine spiced flour.

The afternoon lengthened as the bus climbed through the valleys that fed into the mountains. He was surprised how green the land was. He saw people on the land, farmers and

shepherds, and they were making the most of the land. Cultivated plots stretched up into the hills. Small herds of goats and sheep tended by a shepherd seemed to be travelling up and down the valley. He had expected Morocco to be red with sand dunes. It was ridiculous, he knew, but everyone had a mental image of a country built on something, words and pictures, and through these the country had been categorised, the deserts, palaces, dark men. He could see the men.

The night in Tanger. The bar was not what he was expecting. The man at Tingis had suggested they should go for a real drink at Deen's.

'My name is Haroun. You will like Deen's. It is for you.'

He knew the name. It was in the *Spartacus* guide: 'Just the most lively place in Tanger. Bank clerks and diplomats. Careful after dark.'

He followed Haroun up the Petit Socco and across the square. The road narrowed, and they cut back on themselves down a side alley. A simple sign marked 'Deen's – Prix 10 Euro'. He thought about turning back. Jac blamed him for giving up on things. He took out his wallet and passed the money to the man on the door. Haroun didn't pay anything. The light was low and a heavy Europop beat pushed through the air. There was red lighting and flashing fairy lights. He could just make out the rows of men sitting at the fringes of the room. He could feel their eyes on him. He shouldn't have come in. Haroun took him to a table.

'I'll get us a drink?'

Anthony nodded and Haroun disappeared into the gloom. The music began to eat into him. He wished himself smaller.

A man sat down opposite Anthony. He spoke in what could have been German. Anthony smiled back nervously.

'You are English?'

Anthony nodded. He had explained too many times the subtle differences between Welsh and English.

'I am sorry. I thought you were German. My name is Rashid.' He smiled.

‘Anthony.’

‘You are here on vacation.’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. I like to meet people on vacation. I get to improve my English. I work in a bank. I need to speak to people. You are a very attractive man.’

Anthony blushed. He had never been called that before. People were usually more subtle or honest.

‘Do you have a boyfriend in England?’

A waiter arrived with two drinks. They looked like spirits, probably vodka. Anthony took one of the glasses. His new companion waved the waiter away.

‘I don’t drink. Because I am a Muslim.’ He laughed. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t be doing this either.’ The man raised his eyebrows in a way that sent a shiver down Anthony’s spine. He had never been good at this part of the game. He took a sip of the drink. It was vodka. He then swallowed the remainder. He felt the liquid caress his throat, urging him forward.

In the alley he kissed Rashid. There was no one around. He could feel the urgency in the man’s caress. In the club Rashid had been confident but now, back in the reality of his city, he was scared. They could both go to jail for this. As Anthony pushed his hand hard onto the man’s cock, he could feel the soft, wet warmth of his semen immediately, the tensing of his body as he came, lost in the desire and finality of the moment. Rashid pulled away.

‘I am sorry.’

‘It’s OK. It’s my turn now, though.’

The man shook his head. The situation catching up with him. He straightened his trousers, re-zipping his fly.

‘I go now.’

‘No, not yet.’ The man turned and began walking away. ‘You can’t.’

But he quickly merged into the shadows. A cat scuttled

past him. Anthony looked up. He could see the stars above the city.

Money had always been difficult for Anthony. His father worked at the steelworks. He had been a chemist. Anthony was twelve before he realised his father had more money than other boys' fathers who also worked at the steelworks. His family holidays were package tours to hot places in Spain he couldn't remember the names of. His father changed the family car every few years for a new model. Always something built by Leyland. His father had attempted to push him towards science. Medicine would have been a good career option. Anthony was 'being offered chances that I couldn't dream of'. Anthony had wanted to go to art college. They compromised; English with Drama at Leeds. University was fun but not too serious. After Anthony finished the degree he forgot about money. He wanted to write plays. His father wanted him to get a proper job. Something with a career plan and a pension. Playwright seemed impossible. There were no playwrights in Llanelli. Surely he could write plays in his spare time. The Llanelli Players were always looking for new people.

Anthony forced his way through a series of grim restaurant jobs until he was finally made assistant manager at Pizza Express. He had been good at it. His father saw hope in the title of Assistant Manager. Anthony was now in the restaurant business. When he visited his mother in Llanelli, people still asked him how the restaurant business was going.

He met Jac at Pizza Express. They had both been serving tables, sharing the tips. One night after work they ended up back at his dreary flat off Cowbridge Road. They opened a bottle of Mezcal. Jac had stayed. He wanted to know what Anthony was going to do. Anthony showed him his work.

Jac forced him to request an interview with the literary manager of the Sherman Theatre. It had a reputation for new plays. He had sent a play in six months previously but had

received no reply. The literary manager was a thin uninspired man in his early thirties. He flirted hopelessly, almost desperately, with Anthony. A week later they offered him a contract of production. Sometimes you simply had to stand up for yourself. It seemed a long time ago. Anthony knew Jac had changed his life.

His father had never really accepted Jac. He was civil but cold. It was all a bit beyond his experience. He had wanted grandchildren. Anthony was his only child. Anthony didn't hold it against him. His father was a good man. There were a lot of people at his funeral.

Then there were six years of each other. Their own world.

The money had come as a surprise. The unexpected rush of it. His first commissioned play was worth six thousand pounds. He had lived for a year and a half on the money. Now in Asilah he was embarrassed by it. He had recently bought himself a new car. A Volkswagen Beetle with huge headlamps that looked like eyes. He looked at the car in a way that unnerved him, the sixteen thousand pounds of shine, curves and metal transferring itself into an expression of his wealth and well-being. He'd heard Jac's new boyfriend drove an Astra. This knowledge gave him a perverse enjoyment he was deeply worried by.

The bus had passed men on the side of the road. They were riding donkeys or herding goats. They didn't seem as if they could be part of the same world.

They arrived in Chefchaouen in the late afternoon. It was a town trapped at the blind head of a valley. The mountains continued up into the clouds beyond the blue terraced streets. His hotel was optimistically called The Parador. It had a swimming pool that was tacked onto a slope beyond the garden with a view down into the valley. But a thin mist drifted down from the mountains and no one used it. Anthony shared the breakfast room each morning with a party of Americans. They were old but seemed healthy with

fine skin and bones carrying them well into their seventies. They talked to each other but ignored Anthony. He attempted to start a conversation each morning but was met with only polite short replies.

The town reminded him of a hill station he had visited for a week in India. It had the same narrow, terraced streets. But here there was more space, fewer people. He was offered more mint tea and a lot of grass. Most of the young Westerners seemed to be here for the marijuana. He had avoided it in college. It was a type of penance he was happy with. Jac had sometimes brought some home, and they smoked it late at night with the windows open, listening to the sounds of the city at night. He always felt slightly ridiculous smoking. The unusual touch of the rolled paper filled with dried plants. He liked the smell better. The sweet promise of it. But here he refused the offers.

He bought more things he didn't need, copper bangles, postcards, odd-looking wooden boxes that reminded him of cuckoo clocks without the bird. He was reduced to giving some away to the children who accosted him for money. The begging here was only half-serious. Here the children had homes to go back to.

He met the man from the bank for tea. The visit was going well for him. He had finished the training and had a day spare to be a tourist.

'Sometimes it is good to have nothing to do. Just to be? Don't you think?'

After three days he caught another bus back down to the coast at Asilah. It had an appealing write-up in his *Lonely Planet* guide, although no mention in *Spartacus*. He wrote another postcard to Jac but didn't post it. He found a hotel on the seafront. Huge blue waves rushed in across a wide-open beach. He could feel the sea in the air and the history in the stones of the old town. Portuguese, British, Spanish and French had all fought over this piece of the world. He

had often stayed in places where the Portuguese had built forts. They had a lovely way with stones and the sea. The town had charm. Tree-lined boulevards backing away from a promenade lined with restaurants that served fine French coffee.

He spent a day on the beach. He was resisting the urge to check his email account. He was hoping Jac had written but was afraid he had not. It was a couple of weeks now. He had come to see him off on Cardiff station. It was as if he were performing some last duty. A final leaving. Jac had taken a day off from the new Coffee Republic he was managing. Anthony couldn't believe how miserable he felt. He had watched Jac from the train. He could see Jac's relief, as if he had become a burden. The whole thing had become a burden. The expectations of happiness. Maybe he wasn't meant to be happy.

A group of students were playing football on the beach. A sharp wind blew in off the water. But the players seemed to be able to tease the ball between them, as if it were an object of their own will. They were all lithe men who moved with a grace that was beautiful.

The ease with which he could remove himself from his world caught him. The money he had at home was enough. Here it seemed like too much. He thought about Rashid. The first night in a new country, a strange new man. He had been waiting for him at the top of the alleyway. He was more composed. His suit pulled tight around him. He could sense he wanted more.

'Maybe we can walk together?'

He had taken him back to the hotel.

'No one will know you.'

It hadn't taken long in the room. He was young, inexperienced, still scared. Anthony had brought his own condoms. Rashid's skin was rather beautiful, brown and tight across his chest, his buttocks small, feeling full in his hands. Anthony felt desire even as he was thinking of Jac.

Rashid lay on the bed afterwards covered in the smells of sex, smiling, open. Anthony felt the guilt swallow him again. He walked into the bathroom, closed the door, took a shower. When he returned to the room Rashid was dressed.

‘You want me to go?’

‘It is probably best.’

His face lost its hopefulness.

‘Wait, I will give you something.’ Anthony reached for his trousers on the floor. He took out his wallet. As he offered Rashid fifty euros he felt the sting of his hand sharp across his face.

‘I am not your boy.’ He spat at his feet and left.

In the afternoon he returned to his hotel room. He made love to Jac’s memory, the white, starched sheets sharp and exciting on his own skin. It was a relief to come on his own, without any guilt. He fell asleep into the deep heat of the afternoon. The music of God woke him. It was a beautiful sound. He began to cry.