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Astrid's Metropolis

In this city I see Astrid everywhere. The streets are damaged and full of glass and debris. All because of her, fires still burn and the people still riot here. At night automatic weapons fire down the streets sometimes in conflict sometime in celebration. I hide low on the floor of my apartment and wish Astrid was still here.

Astrid perpetuated all this violence. She kept the people rioting and kept the government pushing back hard. But I remember her in my arms, I remember the soft person I thought I knew. Not the terrorist, not the monster not the real Astrid. I remember her smile and bare feet. I could never imagine those hands destroying anything. I can't understand what Astrid has done to this city.

Guns are still being fired and fired back on the streets. Molotov cocktails and fire bombs find their way into banks, party headquarters and the civilian homes. However I just miss my companion, a beautiful woman full of soul who shared a bed with me. Now as the automatic weapons fade into the background my mind goes back to Astrid and me. Her here with me, and memories I wish were my reality.

Astrid lay awake naked in bed counting down each second from ten. I was awakened by the time she got to five. I looked over at her as she said "three, two, one." Then the call of the minaret went off outside my window. A scream of faith broadcast in the middle of the night.

"Four... exactly four tonight. I love it when it's on the hour. "She kissed me in a cute sort of fun way. Then she bounced on my chest. "I have no desire to sleep." She kissed me again and rolled off me onto her back.

“What?” I asked.

“Tonight it falls at four on the dot.” She replied.

She flipped over onto her stomach and looked at the bed side timepiece, like a child watching for shooting stars. It began loud and clear in the middle of the night. She rolled back over and pressed against my chest. I was thrilled to be woken up by Astrid’s enthusiasm, even if it was the middle of the night.

“Did I wake you up?” She asked me.

“The mosque would have done it anyway... I like being woke up by you a little better.” She smiled. “Work in the morning.”

“I don’t live for my work.”

“Not you... me.”

“What do you have to do?”

“Interviews.”

“You could do that drunk.” She laughed at me.

“Ok... that’s true... but I should at least sleep.” I laughed a little. God was coming in loud through my window. The apartment was next to a mosque and there was no shortage of loud prayers throughout the day.

“Do people actually sleep through this?”

“I could. What keeps me up in this country is the mosquitoes.”

“Drink tonic water.”

“What?”

“Malaria.”

“Oh yeah.” I had no clue what she was talking about. Some kind of useful hint from her past, that past which was a total mystery to me. I had known her for forty-eight hours and we were lovers for forty-one of them. I was too distracted by the haze of sex, fun and passion to start asking questions about who she was.

Those few hours had become an eternity to me. I felt I knew her deeply although I knew nothing. In my mind she understood me but she had no clue who I was. Astrid was everything to me in that slice of time in the city. As we lay in bed I felt that I was in the presence of a familiar soul.

The first time I met Astrid was in a train station. She stood on the platform holding one small leather bag. She held the bag in her left hand, while her right hand remained free. I could see from the muscles in her arm the bag was heavy.

I approached her across the platform. The station was old and dilapidated. Everything worked but as far as stations go it was remarkably unglamorous. Its walls were all white which had decayed from the pollution of time. Above us all was a clock tower that had a constant clicking to it.

She had on a black turtle neck, leather slippers and tight blue jeans. With her sunglasses and short black hair she looked like some fantasy I had. There was no reason for me to assume she spoke English. She had no features or signifiers of being from an Anglophone country. Despite this, I approached her. She stood with her whole back to me and as I moved closer, she looked over her shoulder and spotted me.

“Do you have the time? I asked in unapologetic English.

She turned around, took me in for a moment and then spoke. “What makes you think I speak English?” She said in a thick accent.

“I had no idea... I took a wild guess?”

Silence. She was reading me. I looked right into her as well. But I could tell she saw deeper into me than I could into her.

“It’s 2:30.” She said with ice in her eyes.

“So what’s your name?”

“You are relentless!” She laughed

“What?” I asked. She just looked at me in silence. “I can be a child.” I said with a smile. I was shorter than her and felt like I was standing below her even though I was at eye level with her neck.

“Yeah” I stared at her. Usually this approach with women doesn’t work. She would either walk away and think ‘you’re a creep’ or publicly embarrass me. But in places like train stations and foreign cities, people put their inhibitions on hold. The giant clock gave us another fifteen minutes until the train came. She would either have to reject me cold or fall for my charms.

“Astrid... my name is Astrid.”

“See” I smiled. “Wasn’t that nice?” She gave no response. I waited for a second and she was giving me a look that said to either keep pushing or walk away in defeat. “So... Astrid... where’s that accent from?”

“Guess?”

“Oh please I couldn’t pick an accent out of a line up.”

“What? Brazil. It’s from Brazil.”

“Well... Astrid, this train only goes to one city. It looks like we’re going to the same place...and we’re taking the same train.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Your name?” She demanded.

“Thomas.”

“American?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Yes it is obvious... you’re a child... you know... American” She let out a little laugh. Looked away from me and checked the time.

“We should sit together.”

“And why is that?”

“Because of this.” I reached into my jacket pocket, as I did this she flinched a little. I made direct eye contact with her. I could see she was looking for malice in my actions but instead of whatever she was expecting, I pulled out a silver flask. “It ain’t bourbon unless it’s from Kentucky.”

She looked at me, cold at first then kind of trying not to smile. I watched her, finally she gave in and smiled at my behavior. She looked up at the clock and looked back at me. I handed her the flask and she took a sip. She laughed a little at herself but more so at me. She enjoyed this moment. I had won her over and my small victory provided genuine amusement in an otherwise dull train station.

The prayer continued to blast out of the minaret while Astrid strolled naked through the apartment. She opened up my refrigerator and drank from a bottle of water. “It’s hot here. It was so much cooler up north.” She put the bottle back in the refrigerator. We heard some glass shattering a few blocks away. I jumped up in the bed.

“Astrid.” I said loudly from the other room. “Are you ok?”

“I’m ok...it was outside... just a protest after prayer. The rioters had not fully stopped, just some people out looking for the fight.”

I laid back into my bed. She walked back to the bed and lay down next to me. She stayed in this position for a moment and then got off me. “It’s just too hot.” She laughed and rolled over.

“People are still going at it.” I said.

“Yeah... I can hear. I’m not in the mood for rioting now.”

“Yeah...” I put my hand on the top of the back of her thigh. “It’s boiling. Tell me about yourself, you know... I know nothing about you. What part of Brazil are you from?”

“Sao Paulo.”

“Where do you work in this city?”

Astrid flipped over onto her stomach and rolled her eyes. “Diplomatic... stuff... business... stuff... you know... stuff.” She put her head back down on the pillow and effectively ended my line of questioning. I knew I should ask more, learn more about her but there was a part of me that just enjoyed being naked and silent with Astrid.

The call to prayer ended and she lay there in silence. I looked at her and then her leather bag near the door of the apartment. I looked at the books on the shelves and paintings on the walls in this apartment that was neither mine nor Astrid’s. A borrowed apartment can be so familiar if you don’t think about it.

On the train into the city we finished my flask of bourbon quickly. It was a six hour train ride and we were done before the first hour. Drunken conversation lasted an hour. We talked about nothing in particular. But the ambiance of flirtation could be felt by each of us and those around us.

“Do you have any more Kentucky bourbon?” She asked.

“It’s called Kentucky straight bourbon.”

“What’s the difference?”

I remained silent then laughed at my lack of knowledge. “I got another bottle in my bag. I had to smuggle it in. I heard the city is dry as a desert.”

She rested her head on my shoulder and slept until we were in the city. It felt nice to have her there. It was something I’d like to get used to for my duration of time in the city. A foreign city can be a lonely place.

The train screeched into the station. People got up to get out of the corridor of the train. Everyone’s bags seemed to be too big for the corridor. The train was not a modern train with luxuries like aisles and air conditioning.

Our conversations continued while walking down the platform into another colonial-style station. This newer station had that same faded white as the previous station but in a way felt more regal. More details in the mural on the ceiling, more busy sounds all around us. Whatever colonizer had built this station cared a little more about here than up north.

We kept talking to each other like it was a familiar environment. We stood there ignoring her small leather bag and my large green suitcase. Both these objects were indicators that we did not belong together. Finally the fountain of conversation

dried up and a silence passed by. The silence reminded us of our responsibilities, social roles that prevented us from speaking to each other and enforced our passing mortality.

“I take it you won’t be in the city long.” I said to her

“Why’s that?”

“You have a small bag.”

She looked down at her bag. She looked back up at me sharply and then realized something “Oh yeah I guess it is a little undersized. I pack light.” I wanted to ask more about her bag. She became so intense for a split second at the mention of it.

I looked at her and said the first thing that came into my head.

“Do you want to stay with me?” I asked impulsively.

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t think I was supposed to say that. Although... now that I have... you know... what’s up?” She said nothing. “I have an apartment for the time I’m in the city. Well... it’s not mine... it belongs to the newspaper I work for.” She looked a little nervous and apprehensive. “Oh come on. ... you know you want to.”

She smiled. “You are so lucky I find this little boy thing kind of charming.”

“So that’s a yes?”

“Yes.”

I laughed and smiled. “Let’s get a taxi.

I came to this city to work on a story about the recent political unrest in the past week. It all started small and after the elections. Then as more and more people stopped trusting the government the protests grew. The previous Thursday a protest march turned into a riot. Windows were smashed, cars were burned but no one was killed. The day after that a much more violence broke out in which the police fired their guns and killed several people.

Why her government wanted her to do some kind of business development here was beyond me. The timing couldn’t be worse. The country was weak and at that moment, the city was getting more and more unruly. No one was thinking about the future. But like always, I didn’t bother to ask these questions of Astrid. I didn’t want to interrupt her attraction to me. Two days after the riot my newspaper sent me over from Tunis to cover the story the best I could. The usual correspondent got sick on her tropical vacation and the rioting and violence started very suddenly. She was held up in a hospital and was incapable of covering the story. The only reason they flew me over was because the flight was cheapest

from where I was and I could speak the language. Fate brought me to the city, and something much more divine and sinister brought me to Astrid.

Astrid didn't wear socks. She had leather sandals that were snugly bound to her feet. Sox were just another object that would take up space in her small leather bag. She walked barefoot around the apartment even though the floors were cold. The relatively cool temperature of the floors in all this heat was very appealing to her. I could see the certain pleasure she took in each cooling step.

Astrid, still naked, made her way to the window and struck her fingers through the blinds and opened them up a little so to spy out the window. She closed one eye and scanned the streets out my window with her other. She let the blinds close and turned to me. "There are still riot police outside the window."

"How many?"

"Three."

"Ok...so hot."

"What?"

"You... standing there naked... telling me the riot squads are beating down the door."

"Actually one of them is sleeping." She laughed. "But... yes... I am naked. Are you concerned they are there for you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Foreign journalist... you do the math."

"I doubt I threaten them. Maybe they are there for you. In a country like this a woman as sexy as you is bound to start a riot. Hell I'd riot... revolution... the whole thing for a few nights with you."

"And all you had to do was get me drunk on a train."

She walked back over to the bed and lay down. "It's so hot tonight."

"The police didn't respond to the glass breaking? There are probably more police further down the block."

"Yeah... it's kind of like marshal law... without... you know... calling marshal law."

"I have some interviews tomorrow." I said.

"Alright."

"You can hang out here while I am working... unless you need to go to your consulate."

"Oh no... with all the rioting I can do it all by phone. Who are you interviewing?" She asked casually.

“There’s this community center that seems to be the epicenter of the riots. I really don’t know who I am seeing but I think he’s big.”

“Big?”

“Yeah.”

“How big?”

“I think this is the big one.”

“You shouldn’t go.” She replied

“Why?”

“Might be dangerous.”

“I’m going to go in the morning and do some interviews. Get a well-rounded idea of what they are thinking there, write it up and I’ll be out of the country before it is published.” I sighed at Astrid’s concern.

“That’s why they’ve been rioting for a week straight.” She put her head down and stared at the ceiling.”

When we arrived in the city there was no disturbance near the train station, bus station or airport. The protesters centered themselves out of the way of foreign traffic. This was indicative of their organization. The movement wanted foreigners, especially journalists, to have easy access into the city. No infrastructure was destroyed in the rioting; just symbols of the current regime. The party headquarters and embassies of pro-regime countries were targeted.

This made it obvious the rioting had a singular organizer. There was one entity that was focusing the movement then choosing and targeting the right places. The rioters were communicating with each other over some network.

Between my accent and skin color it became obvious that I was a foreigner. This city was tight. People lived on narrow, winding streets where they could see out their windows and know who’s who in the neighborhood. I assumed people knew a journalist or some foreigner lived in this apartment but I wasn’t a familiar face.

Men gathered at cafes all around the neighborhood and I made myself visible at a café on the corner. I sat drinking a coffee while taking notes about nothing. I put a copy of an English newspaper on the table. I did this with the hopes that someone would approach me and give me something interesting to write about. After an hour of sitting in the café the waiter approached me with a free coffee. I told him I hadn’t asked for it. He smiled and said it was free. Then he walked away.

I felt that this was odd but I looked around the café. No one was paying any attention to me, but I certainly had no objections to free coffee. People sat quietly and drank. I started to drink the coffee and as I lifted the cup to my mouth I noticed the waiter had given me a bright green coffee cup. All the other cups in the café were white.

The waiter paid no attention to me. He tended to other customers. I got up and started to walk to the men's room. He eyed me and I signaled him to watch my bag while I was in the bathroom. He pointed at the staircase and I walked up it to where the bathroom was.

I knew someone would approach me at some point. I walked into the bathroom and a man in a suit was waiting for me. He was postured in an unthreatening way but with a serious ambiance that made me know he wanted to talk to me.

In bad English he explained to me that the one of the protest leaders wanted to be interviewed. I asked for a name and received no answer. All he told me was that there was a community center where I could find the leader and that he would be happy to speak with me. I knew the community center he told me about. It was one block from my apartment. It made sense to offer me the interview. If I was followed I lived in the neighborhood and it would not be so obvious why I was there, as opposed to some of the journalists in the hotels across the city.

The man patted me on the back to tell me to walk away. He trusted me with important information. It was a gamble for him but it was the best way to tell the rest of the world what's was happening in the city. I went back to my table, sat down and drank my coffee. I didn't want to leave suddenly, write down anything or to arouse suspicion.

As I drank coffee in my green cup I felt like I was about to explode inside. This was the opportunity of my career and I had accidentally stumbled into it. All these circumstances happened so suddenly and now I was handed the keys to the kingdom. This was exactly what I wanted. I was living a fantasy. Through luck and fate I got my story and there was a beautiful woman in my apartment waiting for me. I had won a golden ticket to the front seat of this story. I thought of the excitement of telling my editor and family – and especially Astrid.

That night Astrid was now lying naked in my bed. She seemed to have no concern for riots, danger or anything outside of my borrowed apartment. She looked at me and smiled. My eyes wandered around the room and landed on her mysterious leather bag.

She saw me look at her bag and in my periphery I saw her make an unpleasant face.

“What?” I asked

“Nothing” She replied.

“Explain the bag.”

“What about it?”

“It's small.”

“Yeah.”

I said nothing in reply. Astrid had a way of ending a conversation that was very intimidating. She rolled away from me like I had somehow hurt her. I decided to let it pass. I knew nothing about how to make her feel better.

Astrid had her secrets and I was some passing fancy of hers; not entitled to the keys to that kingdom. There was darkness inside of Astrid that seemed to get away from her on occasion and then she was reminded of it by the world around her. Whatever darkness was inside Astrid overwhelmed her in this moment.

“I have a big interview tomorrow.” I said, hopping to change the subject.

“Ok.” She was distant.

“One of the leaders of the resistance.” She didn’t listen. She was in another world – a world of her own creation.

“Astrid are you there?”

“Yeah... I’m here.” I couldn’t see her face but I heard the sound of tears. She was upset but I was too scared to confront her emotions. “Where?”

“Some community center.” I replied “It’s close to here. Just down the street.”

“I saw it. You need to be careful.”

“Nothing is going to happen!” I started to raise my voice.

“You are a boy. Don’t you get that? You think everything revolves around you to watch, to report on - but there is some real danger out there. You are pretending to miss what’s really going on in this horrifying city. It’s in front of your face, Thomas, and you’re too immature to see it.” She got up from the bed. “Wake up!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t go to the community center.”

“I’m going at 10 in the morning. It’s safe... it’s fine.”

“How do you know!”

I had no answer to Astrid’s challenge. I sunk into the bed and waited for her to calm down. I never bothered to ask why she was saying all this or why she was so angry at me. I’m sure she had her reasons. I’m sure there was something inside her that made her react this way, but I wasn’t going to dig deep enough to find out.

She opened her bag and put on underwear and a tank top. She walked into the kitchen and got the other bottle of Bourbon I had smuggled on the train. She poured me a drink and poured one for herself. She walked it over to me and served me like a sick child.

“Bottoms up.” She said.

As usual I drank what was served to me without question. She drank slowly and watched me drink like a hawk. “What’s the occasion?” I asked. She smiled but her eyes were red and puffy from being so upset. “After this story... would you like to go to Tunis?” She made an expression of pain, “Or someplace else?”

“Maybe.” She replied.

“Astrid... I don’t want to be some passing thing. I want to see you after this. Wherever you are going... I want to go too. Because... Jesus... I sound like an idiot... you’re the type of woman I want to be around. Is that stupid?”

“No.”

“Maybe we could do more together. I want to know you. I don’t know anything about you but I feel so... connected... like I just want to learn about you. I know I’m a child and want more than I can have, but... you know... I want you.”

I put my drink down and lay back down in the bed. Astrid knelt down next to me, stroking my head. My eyes got heavy and everything started to blur into pleasant colors. I saw Astrid through all of this tending to me.

“That sounds nice Thomas.” Her voice had an unreal echo to it. She started to become a dream to me. The line between reality and dreams was fading away. I was falling asleep and it was so appealing. Knowing I was in Astrid’s arms made it even more divine.

As I slept I remembered lunch earlier with Astrid that day. We avoided going to a restaurant just in case there was violence. Instead we went to the little shop underneath my building and picked up some basic provisions. We ate lunch on the floor of the apartment. We decided not to drink to save the alcohol for later that night.

Astrid put the whole meal together herself. I stood there and watched. She was in the kitchen preparing a plate for me. As she did this I started to wander around the apartment. I saw her leather bag on the floor and her busy in the kitchen. I squatted down and started to undo the buckle. I lifted the bag a little - it felt like it was filled with metal.

“What are you doing!” She yelled at me from the kitchen.

“Nothing.”

“You were about to go through my bag.” She yelled.

“No I wasn’t” I lied.

“Don’t be a brat, don’t lie to me. I said to stay out of my bag. What part of that did you not understand?”

“I didn’t realize it was so private. I was just curious.”

“I don’t care if you are curious! Don’t touch the bag!” She walked out of the kitchen and brusquely handed me a plate with a sandwich on it. “Eat your lunch.” She started to walk away. I didn’t want to see Astrid angry. I wanted to fix all her problems. I kissed her. It was the only solution to her problems that I could think of

We kissed and made love for the rest of the night. I stopped only to eat the sandwich and forgot all about dinner. We slept on and off for the rest of the night. We watched the sunset reflected off white plaster on the outside buildings. We saw the darkness of night and the formations of riot police anticipating another protest in the night. The minaret called for prayer as the sun set and we dozed off.

I was only woken up later that night by the minaret’s call at 4 am. She was awake looking at a clock She had forgotten momentarily whatever it was that bothered her so much earlier that day. And that is the best memory I have of Astrid... that night when we were happy.

I awoke in my bed and the apartment was empty. The sounds of screaming in the streets made me focus very quickly. I had an awful headache and looked around for Astrid. I stood up and looked out the window into the daylight. There was smoke in the air people were shouting and screaming. Riot police were running in all directions trying to control the undefined chaos.

I was scared and confused. I started to get dressed as quickly as I could. As I put on my second shoe I saw Astrid’s bag open and empty. Fear overtook me. Astrid’s bag was left open for me to find and scrutinize. I ran out the door and onto the streets.

People were plowing into me. Some bleeding, others covered in black dust. Women and men were screaming and praying all around me. Riot police were beating back crowds of people. Police officers violently swung their batons and people became masses of hysteria and not individuals.

I looked to the sky and saw black smoke rising in the distance. The police had no control over the streets so I started to run towards the smoke. As I got closer the chaos grew, the people seemed more hysterical; the police more brutal. People screaming all types of different names in many languages. Everyone reached out for someone whom they might have lost in the smoke and chaos.

I felt the heat a second before I saw the flames. The community center was on fire and people were running towards it trying to get to whoever they believed was inside. Riot police were beating them back, trying to establish some sort of control over the hysteria. People were covered in blood and roamed through the chaos as if they were looking for something.

I paused and looked up at an old clock tower. It was noon. I missed my interview, I missed the opportunity and my life was saved in the process. I thought of the empty leather bag sitting on the floor of the apartment. I thought of the green cup and the café, the minaret at four in the morning. I felt so lost; I wanted someone to explain to me what was happening. I wanted Astrid.

I started to shout, “Astrid!, Astrid!, Astrid where are you?” I became one of the hysterical people scrambling in all the smoke and fire. “Astrid!” I called. “I’m sorry Astrid... I should have done better... I’m a child, Astrid... do you hear me, I’m a child. I didn’t know how real it all was. I don’t realize it’s real Astrid. Astrid! I’m a child, please come back to me.”

I thought of her empty bag. I knew this fire and Astrid were connected. She wasn’t in it. She was somewhere safe and I was here under the flames that she saved me from. Astrid’s soul fluttered over the flames and the chaos to a place where morals are irrelevant and the few nights I showed her constituted joy.

“Astrid!” I screamed again.

I thought of her empty bag and her body touching me. The chaos grew louder and more present. Reality took me away and told me that Astrid was gone. All I get is an empty leather bag. Whatever instrument of destruction was in it, I was too naive to understand. Because of my immaturity all these people suffer except me. I was spared by Astrid, I was pardoned from the judgment others received.

I am a child pretending to be a man. I was a child with the heart and soul of Astrid and the world will pay for it with the wrath of a beautiful woman. Astrid, queen of the metropolis, Astrid the wicked and merciful, Astrid, beauty, death and sex. The cops swung their batons randomly at the crowd. I kept screaming for Astrid. Finally a shot was fired and a silence froze both rioters and police for a moment. It was the first shot fired during the unrest. Then the crowd roared and surged and people became more and more violent. After that the riots became wilder, unorganized. Infrastructure was destroyed, marshal law was declared and I was trapped in the city. I didn’t want to leave. I wanted Astrid to come back to me. I wanted to see her. I keep remembering screaming her name in front of the fire. Only I know who she is. Only I know the delicate touch of this terrorist. I don’t care, I live in the city for Astrid. I am just a little child, a boy in Astrid’s Metropolis.

