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Opening Extract from...

Another Country

Written by Anjali Joseph

Published by Fourth Estate

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Another Country

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FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Fourth Estate
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
London W6 8JB
www.4thestate.co.uk

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

HB ISBN 978-0-00-746277-3
TPB ISBN 978-0-00-746278-0

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Typeset in Minion by G&M Designs Limited,
Raunds, Northamptonshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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PARIS

1

Leela, self-conscious, released into the world, walked down the boulevard de Sébastopol. A September afternoon. Chestnut trees allowed their leaves to fall; the warm air carried them to the pavement. She had never seen leaves fall so slowly.

She'd been in Paris a week. She had found herself a studio apartment on the sixth floor of a building on the boulevard Saint-Denis, been to the offices of the language school, and obtained a copy of her contract. She'd gone to a branch of the Poste and tried to open a bank account. The woman behind the desk had looked at her sharply and said, 'Not only do you not have a Carte de Séjour, but you have a tourist visa. In ten days, Mademoiselle, you will be in situation irrégulière.' Leela realised this was the worst possible situation to be in. She burst into tears.

She went back to the Modern English School. The secretary, Mme Péron, looked upset. She said, 'But there is no problem. Go to the nearby branch of the Crédit Lyonnais. They know us.'

Leela opened an account. The next day, she took a train to London; Mme Péron had not applied for a work permit for her, forgetting that though Leela had lived a long time in England, she still had an Indian passport. A belated interview at the French Consulate had to take place.

In South Kensington her chest was x-rayed and she was examined by a French doctor. She was not tubercular, or ille-

gal. She was granted a visa, and returned to Paris. When she had first arrived, a week earlier, it had been late summer, shadows long in the Tuileries. There had been ten days till Leela was to begin work, and she'd hoped to finish all the necessary tasks. Now, on her return, she was more realistic about the frustrations that awaited. It was suddenly autumn, the last autumn of the twentieth century: a cooler wind blew grit in the air, and on the boulevard de Sébastopol the leaves were falling in a very leisurely way indeed before they alighted on the street.

The simplest way to get to Patrick's house was to walk down the boulevard de Sébastopol till it hit the rue de Rivoli, then turn left. The rue de Rivoli became the rue Saint-Antoine, off which Patrick lived.

It was not the shortest route, but Leela was likely to become wildly lost even on a small mission near home. She had listened to Patrick's directions attentively, therefore, when she had spoken to him from London a few days earlier, but she now ignored them. She would go the way she knew.

In Haussmann Paris, the boulevards created vistas that implied grandeur. You were led past trees, impressive shops, and cast-iron-fenced square gardens in which elderly men sat on wooden benches looking, themselves, like overstuffed pieces of furniture. Later, there would be a focal point: a strange, neo-antique Egyptian column, or some Gothic remains. After that, more softly, the river and its joyous

bridges. The sky opened out. But even as you wandered down the wide boulevards, examining the stone facades of buildings austere with established money, there was a feeling of being overseen and observed in a way Leela remembered from the largest court of her Cambridge college. Walking across this open space, in front of a neoclassical stone building, dwarfed by its scale and restricted to the paths that must be followed amid the sacred turf, she had not felt at home or welcomed, but breathed upon by pomp, and exposed in a large, cruel theatre.

There were other streets: the curving lanes of the Marais, through which she could have walked to reach Patrick's flat; or the alleys near the river on the Left Bank. But for one as constitutionally, as easily lost as she, it was necessary to stick to the boulevards and avenues. At least at first. On them, she loved the occasional diagonal cross street, as near the place Etienne Marcel: the slicing roads meant the last building before the open space was an etiolated triangle, as though a block had been turned into a slice of cake. They were rues transversales in French, a name that always felt magical to Leela, for these streets were not exposed to the eye in the same uncomfortably Olympian way as the boulevards; from them could arise surprises, chance meetings, the unexpected.

2

'Patrick, what are you *doing* here?' she asked.

His deep voice boomed out, good-natured. He liked to talk.

'Well, Leela, after college I did some temping. Mostly at an insurance company in Chelmsford. Taking a train every day to get there, then all day data entry, smoking breaks, the office canteen – they gave you a card and you charged it with money and used it to pay. Closed system.' He looked at her over his spectacles, raised bushy eyebrows.

'I'd get up early, at five, and read for an hour and a half before I had to leave so my brain didn't atrophy completely. The brain's a muscle, you know. That's what I keep telling my mother –' he turned to the side table and fiddled with the coffee pot, the sleeves of his white shirt flapping, ghostly. 'She doesn't use her brain enough so it's turning into the equivalent of my thighs.' He smiled, raised eyebrows at her again.

Leela was charmed. It made her bullish. 'But that sounds useful – at least you were reading,' she said. It bored her to be serious; however, her manner was almost always serious.

'No, you know, it wasn't, Leela,' he said. 'Because you just have two hours to insulate yourself against the world, and then you spend the whole day doing something completely asinine, repetitive – your brain could be turning to shit for all the world cares. That's why it's good you have a job like this, teaching, with time to yourself. The world doesn't care about your mind, after college. It's a shock in a way.'

They were getting off the subject. Leela was tense with trying to keep up. She felt an unspoken pressure to perform, and she performed badly under pressure. 'So why Paris?' she persisted.

'Well, I'm doing some consultancy work, technical writing, for two of the companies I worked for last year. And I'm writing a novel.'

'What's it about?'

'It's about a group of characters – it's difficult to explain. I think I'm stuck.'

'How much have you written?'

'Maybe thirty thousand words.'

'That's about half? A bit less?'

'Something like that. It's a big undertaking.'

'I'd love to read it,' she said. She felt hopelessly threatened. Writing a novel was a thing she'd dreamt of, and she was well past the age she'd set herself. She'd planned to be a prodigy, but had already turned twenty-one, an age when everything important seemed to be over.

'But why are you in Paris?' He smiled, and there was real sweetness in his face.

'I have this job, I told you,' Leela muttered.

'That's not what I'm asking.' She suspected he found her brusqueness half-charming; he knew that she liked him.

She glared.

Patrick grinned and rooted about the round table for his cigarettes. He found the packet, extracted one, looked at Leela, smiled to himself, located the matches, lit up, exhaled smoke and wellbeing. 'Why did you decide to come here?'

We're not really friends, she thought. I'm just some girl who likes him.

'I've always wanted to live in Paris,' she said. She thought of her first visit, walking early in the morning from the coach station towards the métro and the half-light, the cemetery, its rising wall, and Amy, enthusiastic in vest and shorts, carrying a huge rucksack, chattering unstoppably about friends at home as they passed things that Leela's heart had sung out were quintessentially Parisian – a cast-iron lamp post, or the tree next to it that sent a spray of leaves into the yellow light – until Leela had thought *I can't bear it any more* and said something, anything, to put an end to the stream.

Patrick said, 'Leela, I know we said we'd go out to eat, but I'm not really hungry I'm afraid – I got up late, I had a terrible hangover, and then I spent the afternoon tidying. It's the best way to deal with a sense of self-loathing. It's still messy in here –'.

'It's not messy,' she said. She looked around the flat, with its high ceiling and large windows. 'It reminds me of your room in college,' she said.

'It's nicer – but it's a little like that. Have some wine?'

'Thanks.' She accepted a glass, already dimly offended. He looked the same as in college, perhaps slightly more relaxed. His features, and the way he dressed, made him look older, but he wasn't old; he was a year older than she was.

The parts of his presence that she perceived – his height, his thinness, the mop of curly hair, his spectacles, a certain way of dressing, his wit, his oddness, his flashes of anger –

these would be her stamp of the ideal for some years to come. And yet they were accidental, weren't they?

'Let's go out,' he said a little later. 'A few of my friends are meeting round the corner, in an Irish pub. I'd like a drink, and you could meet them as well. They're nice.'

They left the flat, and she stood on the stairs while Patrick locked the door.

Stella was attractive, if not beautiful: she was slim and tall, and her brown hair was shiny and fell past her shoulders. Her mouth was painted. She was confident, and straightforward. She made Patrick laugh; Leela looked on, agonised. There was an older man, Craig, who owned an unspecified business; he was divorced, in his forties, his clothes and body comfortably untidy. He told Leela about his children, who lived in Amsterdam with their mother. Leela made conversation. She knew how: from an early age, she and her younger sister had been brought out at dinner parties to talk to the adults.

The pub was green-painted outside and in. There was a shamrock on its sign, and the whole group – Patrick, Stella, Craig, a blonde girl called Sarah who left early to meet her boyfriend, and another man, Simon – was delighted that unlike in most of Paris, here you could get beer by the pint. Leela reverted to a teenage habit and drank Guinness, slowly, to stop being hungry. By the second pint she was euphoric and nihilistic. The pub closed.

'We can go back to my flat, it's just round the corner,' Patrick said. He had wine, and a bottle of whisky. They sat at the long table, a convivial seminar group. Leela made fun of Patrick – she didn't know what else to do – and otherwise she was silent, taciturn when a question was asked of her, for she was bad at being in the spotlight. She worried about Stella.

'Oh, you teach at Modern? That's near my office, actually. Or not too far. We often go out round there. You should give me your number, let's go for a drink,' Stella said, and pleased though suspicious, Leela did, dictating it pretentiously in French. Stella's French was good. She was taking lessons. 'I'm going to be here for three years, so I thought, why not? It's not that I need it for work – most of our material comes in English – but it's an opportunity.'

She entered Leela's number in her mobile.

At two Craig, Simon, and Stella left. Patrick and Leela carried on chatting in the lamplight of the high-ceilinged room, its intensity and the fumes of whisky and cigarettes mimicking earlier meetings in earlier rooms. Patrick put on music.

'Is there something you'd like to hear?'

'Anything. Miles Davis.' Patrick had once told her he had learnt the trumpet for a while.

He was amused, and he put on a couple of tracks, then changed the music to something quiet and electronic. After a few minutes he smiled at Leela. 'Well,' she said, 'I think I'll go home.'

'All right.' He came to open the door. 'Are you sure you're going to be all right getting back?'

'I'll be fine,' she said. She would worry, she knew, about losing her way and being abroad in a strange city at a strange hour.

'Thanks for coming, Leela. Let me know if you're doing anything, and I'll let you know if I'm doing something,' Patrick said.

'Goodnight, thanks.'

She made her way down the narrow steps, across the courtyard and into the street. It was too late to take the overlit boulevards. She began to walk up the winding inside streets with their old town houses, trendy boutiques, small squares; in darkness and silence, avoiding anyone she saw. The street lamps shone and all was quiet, only the occasional cat running across the road, or a man who examined her face in the light but didn't comment. Near the school of the Arts et Métiers she felt better; she was in the third now, so it wasn't far. How tired she was, and how stupid to be walking alone. In the lamplight ahead was a lone figure on a bicycle. It seemed to be a girl with very short hair. The cyclist went slowly, almost meanderingly, just ahead of Leela, as though showing her the way. Yet when she slowed, Leela slowed too; they didn't meet, and the cyclist didn't force a confrontation. Near the rue Réaumur, near enough for even Leela no longer to be able to become lost, the cyclist turned in another direction. Only when Leela typed in the digicode, pushed the solid door of her bourgeois building, and heard it close behind her, did she begin to shiver with the awareness of danger undergone, and past.

3

Her bed was a narrow platform under the eaves of the Haussmann building. In it, she felt like the goblin visiting the student in Andersen's fairy tale. The beams were a foot from her head, and shed wood dust; for the first ten days she wheezed, and woke twice a night shouting, dreaming she was being buried alive. When she went to London for the visa interview, she bought four metres of white cotton in an Indian shop in Wembley. She swaddled the dark beams, and fixed the cloth with drawing pins. The dreams, and the coughing, stopped.

The flat was nineteen metres square, a figure she possessed with as much authority as her own measurements of height or weight. 'Studios are often twenty metres square. This one is small but it has everything,' said the landlord, M. Turgis. He was a psychiatrist, a good-looking auburn-haired man with bright blue eyes and a yellow smile; he lived on the fourth floor, where Leela went every month to pay the rent in cash. He would invite her in; the flat was elegantly furnished. For reasons she didn't understand, M. Turgis (not Dr, but M., he said) told her of his history. His mother was Norwegian. That explained the colouring of his two sons, pretty children of white-blond hair, fair skin, and the same bright blue eyes. The flat on the fourth floor had been in his family for some time; he had, he explained, bought three of the chambres de bonne on the sixth floor when they came up for sale in recent years. Now he rented them out. Leela was lucky, he said: the others had shared bathrooms, but hers was self-contained.

It was an odd shape; rather than being square, it was a parallelogram with a thin arm attached. In the parallelogram was the living room, with a bookshelf, a green plastic television set, a cheap blue carpet, a desk, a folding chair, and a floor cushion. A single, heavy window gave onto the narrow inner courtyard, and looked across at another such window. There was no view but sky, and the other window. Above the bookshelf, below the beams, was the blue-painted sleeping platform, reached by climbing a small wooden ladder. The platform was L-shaped; Leela slept near the ladder, snug against the external wall. On the other side was the slender corridor that ran down the sixth floor's maids' rooms. Here, lying in bed in the morning, masturbating serially, falling asleep midway then starting again, trying to work up the energy to begin the day – a period of time that, when she didn't have an early class, could persist until lunch – she heard the other inhabitants of the sixth floor hurrying out. Most were students; there was a Chinese man in his thirties, a foreign white man, where from she didn't know, and a young Chinese girl. M. Turgis' tread, more assured and heavier, theatrically careful, could also be heard from time to time, though she was relieved he didn't call on her often.

When she got up she would slide down the ladder, a move that became automatic, and go into the cramped white-tiled kitchen area, which held a small stove, a steel sink, a drop-leaf table, two chairs, a mop, and a blue and white kettle that she'd bought at the Monoprix on the boulevard. She would make coffee, and stare out of the window.

In the studio, everything needed for living had somehow been accommodated. Because it was well appointed, she tried to spend time in it as though it had been another space. On Sundays, she bought newspapers and croissants and sat on the living-room floor to eat breakfast and read. Quickly the size of the place would begin to weigh on her; rebelling against the obvious, she'd stay there. She'd turn on the television, or read one of the fat paperbacks she'd bought: *Les Misérables*, volumes 1 and 2; they were issued by different publishers so there was a gap between the two volumes, a lacuna that finally put paid to her desire to improve her French and follow the depressing fate of the convict Jean Valjean. She'd drink too much coffee, or overeat; she would use the telephone, and call her sister, who was usually out, or a friend; she'd imagine in great detail the things she would do later, and pore over listings in the *Pariscope*. She'd drink cheap wine, or smoke cigarettes she didn't enjoy, then worry for her health. It would begin to be dark outside, the sky fading through the heavy, viewless window, and the light of the window opposite coming on and brightening. It gave onto a room where often a man was standing, staring straight across, as though facing his fate. Leela would sometimes meet his eye when she stood at the sink, washing a cup; it dawned on her only after weeks that the facing room was the shared toilet, and that the man who occasionally turned to look into her face was holding his penis and urinating.

The apartment also held the memory of the time, in the early days of her occupation, when she had come down with a baffling fever and stomach ailment. For several days, all she

could do was lie on the foam mattress under the beams, and sweat and shiver, sleep and wake. She was hungry and had a headache but was unable to get down the ladder. She couldn't drink water, so didn't need to pee; that was a saving. The fever lasted for three days. Leela mused in between delirium on the indignity of such an end.

On the fourth day, when she managed to get down the ladder, her new, purplish-blue telephone began to beep, and its lights flash red and green. The voice on the other end of the line was warm: it was Nina, another of the new girls from work, saying she had had a terrible stomach bug. She'd had an idea Leela, too, might have been unwell. Could she come over, bringing aspirin, and something to drink?