

## “Music Below”

Lucy was tangled in the bed sheet, and she was trying to unwrap it from around her. She didn't like being unable to move. Joseph's body behind her was exuding heat that seared her when his flesh touched hers, which made her pull away sharply. The weather had turned warm again – an Indian summer, they called it. Her skin was wet with sweat, and the bed was soaked in sunshine. She listened to the rhythm of a bass line, the metronomic beat from music below Joseph's flat.

‘Come here, gorgeous.’ His arm wound around her waist. She held onto the headboard and groaned so he would know she wanted to be left alone. He either didn't notice or disregarded what she wanted. It was too hot to wrestle, so she lay out straight, let him squeeze her in a cuddle.

‘You're like a child,’ she teased. ‘Stop cuddling up to me like a kid.’

She prised his arm from her waist to pull away and breathe. She looked at him. He really was beautiful. The signs of ageing on his face and skin and hair were like stamps in a passport, proof of having lived. There was a tiny bit of flesh removed, a scar that was barely noticeable unless she was as close as she was now. He said it was from when he was a young boy, he'd fallen on gravel. The lines around his mouth were accented when he smiled or frowned. The skin around his eyes was dark like coffee, it made him look weary and sexy. This late-thirties man balanced a boyishness with his age, a combination of reckless charm and accumulating experience. It was that which first made her want to fuck him.

‘Shall we ...?’ He lifted the sheet to reveal his erection.

‘With this heat?’

‘What can I say? You're an aphrodisiac.’

She tried not to recoil too obviously from the embarrassing effort at seduction.

‘I need to breathe,’ she told him. ‘I'm too hot.’

She peeled the sheet from her body and sat up to feel the breeze from the window against the back of her head. She got out of his bed and stood beside it, looking out of the window. Lucy turned away from the view and explored the flat. It had been several months since she had been here last. The white walls seemed closer somehow, as if the space that made up the bedroom, front room, and kitchen was now smaller. The bareness of the walls and the smooth wood floor made the flat feel as if everything in it was within reach. There was no complexity here, everything was close and nothing was hidden – standing by the bed, she could see the kitchen table, the chairs, the Peace Lily, the clothes rail and the clothes hung on it, everything here but the bathroom. There was nothing to explore.

As she gazed across the flat, she heard him stir and turn over. He was looking at her with one arm behind his head, his foot twitching in time to the music from the neighbours. She was attracted to him, but he knew he looked good, posed like that, and it turned her off a little. She had never been aroused by efforts to arouse her – the beauty of somebody simply being themselves always turned her on. Joseph's chat-up lines had not got her into bed. She hadn't had sex with him until they'd ended up at his flat because he'd got into a fight with somebody. She found his split lip sexy and wanted to nurse it. She'd cleaned up the blood, he'd taken his ripped shirt off, and the animosity of what he'd got himself into turned her on. She should have condemned the stupidity of his violence, but knowing it was wrong only spurred the attraction on. Then she had kissed his wounded lip and went to bed with him.

‘I've just realised,’ Joseph said, ‘you haven't told me anything about Paris.’

Lucy returned to the bed but stayed at the bottom end, perching her bum on the mattress and stretching her bare legs over his feet. ‘Well, we haven’t talked about much, have we? We’ve been busy.’

He sat up and moved toward her, put a hand on her knee and brushed it with his thumb. His knuckles were hairy. The skin over the joints looked like the sheet on the bed, deep wrinkles bunched up all over.

‘What happened to Helen?’ he asked. ‘Why didn’t she come back with you?’

‘She got to stay longer. My job ended, hers didn’t.’

‘That’s funny how that worked out, that after you were the one who convinced her to go ...’

‘I understand the irony.’

‘So, Paris kept Helen.’

Lucy slid off the bed and away from him. ‘Actually, I don’t feel like talking about it right now. I’ve been telling everyone about it since I’ve been back.’

He nodded and said, ‘I understand,’ but he didn’t understand. The truth was that Lucy was not tired of talking about Paris and felt like she never would be. She was tired of the way people interpreted Paris, forcing her experiences through their own narrow prisms. She didn’t want it distorted or packaged into small homogenous boxes of commonplace sentiments, the kind written on postcards about what kind of food she’d eaten, and what sights she’d seen, and what the weather was like. She tried to illuminate such subjects with observations about subjective details: the strength of the coffee served, the particular shade of grey that she had only ever seen at Montmartre Cemetery, what the frantic and superficially aggressive interactions between people on Paris’ streets had taught her about herself. But these things were diminished by patronising attempts to liken these to mere holiday anecdotes. When she told her father about the humbling experience of being truly insignificant in such a large city, that she could walk by so many people and be seen by none of them, he responded with, ‘That’s why the sodding traffic is a nightmare in cities. Clueless idiots on the road taking no notice.’

Joseph got out of bed, and she saw a change in his eyes. ‘Listen to that – they’ve got their music on downstairs *again*.’

‘It’s “Ares”. It’s great.’

‘What is?’

He moved toward her, and she casually moved away.

‘The song they’re playing. It’s Bloc Party, I love this song.’

He didn’t seem interested in the information. He was busy trying to lace his fingers through hers, but she wasn’t playing along. She left her hand limp and their fingers tangled, twisted and hurt, so he gave up. He took his trousers from the floor and slid them on, while watching her suspiciously. ‘Why do you seem distant?’

‘Do I? I don’t mean to.’

‘You don’t seem to want to touch me.’

‘Joseph, we just had sex, how can you say I don’t want to touch you?’ She knew he was tightrope walking across moods – he might still fall into depression.

‘You’re right. Sorry.’ He did up his belt, and his eyes softened. This was the reason they could not stay in the suffocating relationship they’d once had. It was heart breaking to be letting him down every time she couldn’t cheer him up. In the end, letting him down that one, big time in ending their relationship had been the better option. But sex kept them together, kept them in each other’s lives. He insisted that he not be defined by his disorder, that she respect that he had the capacity to enjoy his libido.

Lucy's phone began to ring. It was in the pocket of her jeans, which she had kicked off earlier, next to the bed. She picked them up and dug into the pockets until she retrieved the phone, still ringing. She pressed 'silence'.

Joseph yelled at the floor, 'Christ, do they have to have their music *so loud*?' He pointed at her phone, which she was hiding back in her pocket. 'Who was that?'

Joseph's interest in the identity of the caller worried her. She knew his patterns. She told him, 'It was a friend.'

'Oh, right.' He went across the room to the sink in the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. 'The guy you were sleeping with?'

'Yes.'

'Are you still sleeping with him?'

'Why are you asking?'

'I can't ask?' he said sharply.

'Yes, you can ask. I just wondered why. Does it bother you?'

He didn't say anything. He still had his back to her. The music below got louder.

'Joseph, you know I have my own life and –'

'Yeah, yeah. You have your own life, and I don't get a say in it or who you fuck. I'm just the "ex". What a joke.'

'What does *that* mean?'

'I may be the ex,' he said, between self-assured sips of his water, 'but I'm also the one you keep coming back to.'

'How many times are we going to have this conversation? I'm getting bored of it.'

He sighed, measured and even, and then threw his glass into the sink. She heard it smash, but she wasn't scared. She was desensitised to the acts of aggression that accompanied his depressions. He muttered something and seemed to be picking at his hand, still turned away from her. He dropped a small piece of glass onto the counter. She saw a drop of blood on the shard as it danced to its own music, tinkling across the work surface before falling dead. Joseph sucked at his hand. She almost asked if he was okay, but of course he was, and the injury was his own damned fault. He groaned, took his hand from his mouth, clenched it and struck it down on the edge of the sink.

'Don't!' Lucy yelled at him.

'Don't what?' he yelled back, turning to face her. 'Don't love you? Don't want you for myself? I can't do that.'

'You do just fine without me. I know about the girl from Zane's. And what about Stacey? Yeah, you've gone quiet now, haven't you?'

'They don't mean anything, not like you.'

'How lovely.' Lucy had calmed enough to pull on her pants and jeans.

'Don't go.' He had a pathetic grimace on his face, that wounded look that used to work on her. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to smash the glass.'

She laughed, knowing he could not be so stupid as to think *that* was why she was leaving. As she was reaching for her shirt, he came across the room to her, his eyes seeking forgiveness and leaking weak tears, his voice pleading for sympathy.

'Baby, don't leave. I don't mean these things I say, I don't know why I say them. I'm just scared, I guess. Please don't leave.'

'That's the point, Joseph. I'm going to leave, and you have to be alright with that.'

'What do you mean? Where are you going?'

'Cyprus next.'

'Cyprus? What the fuck is in Cyprus?'

'I'm desperate to go there – you don't get it.'

‘Jesus Christ.’ He paced away from her. The rhythmic pounding of the neighbours’ music got louder again, the tempo of this new song more intense. ‘That fucking music!’

‘I’ve had enough. I’m leaving.’

‘I didn’t mean to throw the fucking glass.’

‘Bullshit.’

He went back to the cupboard above the sink, pulled down a glass, and threw it hard at his feet. Shards of it flew across the kitchen as he glared at her. ‘*That’s* throwing a glass.’

‘Very mature.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘Fuck you.’

She crashed around the room, gathering up her phone and her clothes, putting on her bra and shirt. He stood where he was and glared at the floor. The destructive relationship they’d once shared had taught her that arguing resulted from getting too close. Since breaking up with Joseph, she had not been close with anyone, and it had worked so far. But he was pulling her back. She was only like this with him, he was the only person who could make her so angry. The four walls of this room could seem like four walls of confinement. Prison. The person sharing this space had become a cellmate. Captor. Punch-bag. She needed to get out of this cycle that threatened to keep her here.

‘I don’t want this ...’ she muttered. ‘So fed up of it ... *Je ne resterai pas ici pour lui. Lazy trou du cul. Bâtard misérable.*’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Nothing.’

‘At least speak in English,’ he said.

‘Learn French.’

The music was turned up again, this time coinciding with Lucy’s words, so they weren’t properly heard. Joseph stomped on the floor and bellowed toward his feet. ‘Turn it down, or I swear to God I’ll come down there!’

‘Jesus, leave them alone. You can’t control everyone.’

He stared for a minute, then he stomped on the floor again. The music continued.

‘You’re like a child,’ she told him. She didn’t want a boy, she wanted a man. She wanted a temporary man, who would do for now and then make way for the next one, in the next place. People were tied to places, so she could not be tied to people.

Joseph marched away from her, so quickly that his feet slipped on the wood floor. He almost slid into the door. He ordered her to stay in the flat, said he’d be right back, and then he left. The door slammed shut behind him.

Lucy went to the door and pulled it open enough to peer through the gap and see the landing outside. Joseph had gone downstairs. She leaned a little further out until she heard a banging below, and she jumped back and pushed the door shut. She could still hear the confrontation downstairs. Joseph was bellowing when another male voice responded, less loudly, less aggressively. A third male voice joined in, this one matching Joseph’s angry tone. The volume of the argument increased. Lucy leaned out of the door again to hear what was being said.

‘How many times? How many?’

‘You don’t have to be a dick about it.’

‘You know as well as I do, I’ve told you *too many times.*’

‘Back off.’

‘Turn it down. Now.’

‘Back off. We’re going inside.’

‘I told you to turn it –’

‘Back off –’

Lucy heard a shuffling sound, a slap and a thud, someone yelled but she didn't know if it was Joseph, another thud and more yelling, then a door slammed shut. Feet pounded on the stairs, coming up to her floor. It sounded like more than one person. Joseph appeared at the top of the stairs, but he was far enough down the hall and not looking her way, so she stayed watching him. He stopped to talk to someone who was with him. She couldn't see the other person, but recognised his voice.

'Damn it, Joseph, what is wrong with you?'

It was Joseph's father. She'd met him before. He was a dominating man, the kind who had nothing to prove, whose presence and tone of voice commanded attention without yelling or other flourishes of assertive behaviour.

'Dad, this has been an on-going problem with those neighbours.'

'What's this problem exactly? What have they done so wrong that you think it's appropriate to start fights in the hallway?'

'We didn't fight!'

'Only because I happened to turn up and pull you away. So tell me what was so awful that you had to resort to your usual aggression?'

'It was ... They had music ... It was too loud.'

'Their music was too loud? That was all?' Joseph's father sighed, a loud and long expression of his exasperation.

'And ... I think he's a drug-dealer.' Joseph was lying, trying to justify himself. He'd never said anything about drug dealing to Lucy.

'Don't stand there and whine. You're a two-faced liar. Of all your siblings, *you* are the disappointment. You seem to love arguing and fighting. And the only reason I look out for you at all is because you're my son.'

Lucy held the handle down as she closed the door, so it wouldn't click. She went back to the kitchen to get a glass of water. The intensity of the argument between father and son had unsettled her, and her anger at Joseph had thinned. She pitied him too much now to feel justified in her resentment toward him. A minute later, Joseph came back into the flat, alone. His eyes had that glazed look they got when his mind was elsewhere, somewhere dark.

Lucy said, 'That was uncalled for, what your dad said.'

He shook his head. 'He's right.' He dragged himself toward the bed. 'And I've never deserved you either.'

'Joseph, don't ...'

It was too late – he fell onto the bed, face down, defeated. She had seen this kind of crash before, though it rarely happened this quickly. She felt now that she couldn't leave. This was Joseph in his most vulnerable state. She would have to sit with him and stroke his back or back off, as and when he required either. She looked to the door as she sat next to him.

'Joseph?'

He didn't respond. He was staring at the wall.

'Joseph, do you want something to eat? I could make us some food.'

He mumbled, his face mashed into the pillow, 'Not hungry.'

There was a long pause. She saw that he was trying to get up. There were no movements, but he had a determined look in his eyes that had banished the sadness from them.

'I'm sorry.' His voice was soft, the fire was gone.

'It's alright. I know you try hard to keep it under control.'

'I know you have to leave.' He sat up. 'Just give me a cuddle before you go.'

She laughed softly at him. 'You're like a big child.' She gave him a hug. He held her, his strong arms around her shoulders, and they stayed like that for a while. Eventually, he

sank back on the bed and pulled her with him. They were lying side by side, his arms still around her, the music below still playing. She had lost her chance to leave, she was going to stay here now. He had this way of keeping her here.

**'Music Below' is taken from the collection "Burn the Pages"**