RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Sandstorm

Henry Shukman

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About the Author

Henry Shukman's first book of fiction, *Darien Dogs*, was published in 2004 to great acclaim. Having won the Arvon International Poetry Competition in 2000, his first collection of poetry, *In Doctor No's Garden*, won the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival Prize and was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. He was selected as one of the 2004 Next Generation Poets.

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Fiction

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VINTAGE BOOKS
London

La plus belle des choses, pour certains, c’est une troupe de cavaliers; pour d’autres, une armée de fantassins; pour d’autres encore, une escadre en mer. Et pour moi, c’est de voir quelqu’un aimer quelqu’un.

– *Sappho* (tr. Jacques Lacarrière)

1997

AT SIX O'CLOCK the bar on the east side of Seventh Avenue had just been found by the late sun. Mortimer watched as the smooth frosted panes of its four windows were suffused with a dense gold glow. They lit up like sheets of light: a hazy rich light as of a harvest sunset in the fields back home and long ago in the England of his childhood, which no longer existed; or as of the desert in the late afternoon when the torture of daytime was over, when at last the sun granted a reprieve and for half an hour, while it rested above the horizon, all things settled into themselves, bathed in light like a charm. Mortimer remembered how at that hour in the desert it was as if you had been asleep all day, your consciousness beaten into a dark corner, and now at last it woke up, came out of its cave and found the whole world waiting. He remembered how loose and fluid his limbs would feel, how happy he'd be to be standing on the dust in scuffed boots with nothing but the flat earth in all directions, every last foot of it empty of humanity, of vegetation, of clutter. It was a marvellous thing to be in the desert at the end of day. It was one of earth's prizes.

He thought of it now and was filled with emotion. Tears threatened to come to his eye. Terrible, he told himself, you're a terrible, sentimental old soak.

He lifted his glass and drained it, then set it down beside a three-day-old London *Times* which lay folded into a cudgel on the bar top. He glanced at it, then twirled his finger at the barman. 'Another Ballantines.'

The barman nodded at the newspaper. 'Any news?'

'News?' Mortimer picked up the newspaper and shook his head.

But there was news, and he couldn't resist another look at it. They had taken to having snapshot obituaries in a

column down the side of the main page these days. He had stumbled across it by chance, while browsing through the foreign pages, and he had been carrying it around with him ever since.

> French photographer Celeste Dumas, 53, died last Wednesday at her home in Pau, south-western France, of bone cancer. Once celebrated for her adventurous work as a war photographer in the Sahara Desert, in collaboration with controversial British journalist Charles Mortimer, she was best known for her portraits of provincial and rural France, in particular of the Languedoc peasantry. Last year the Centre Pompidou held a retrospective of her work. She is survived by a husband and two daughters.

He might even have shown it to the barman – as if it might mean anything at all to him – but reading that epithet about himself again, decided he had better not. Over here, not even the editor at the magazine where he sometimes worked seemed to have any idea how badly things had gone for him; or else they'd all forgotten. But back in London they hadn't, apparently.

He had a swig of his fresh drink and wondered: how befuddled, how silted up and muddy-headed had he let himself become that for so many years now he hadn't even thought of Celeste? He couldn't bear to, presumably. More than twenty years ago: he had been a young man, still starting out. And now, as an overweight, supernumerary hack who had lost his best contacts, been hounded out of London; now, when he was down and vulnerable, with a bad heart, with no dependable work, no aeroplane tickets in his back pocket waiting to ferry him to far-off disasters that had nothing to do with him personally – now that he

was defenceless, there she was again, and it was far too late.

For a moment he couldn’t move. There was that desert light before him, on the windows. Briefly he could see her face again, the colour of desert sand, her eyes streaked with shards of sunlight on rock. A hot breeze touched his cheek, and he could smell the wonderful dry aroma of dust, something like fresh plaster except it spoke of openness not of walls; of freedom not cramped and cramping houses – freedom from clouds, from cities, from people, from beasts, trees, from everything: freedom to go into the garden of God with a light heart.

1976

1

MORTIMER GAVE COPY the final word and hung up.

He pulled a Jazira cigarette from the paper pack on the table, drew the heavy glass ashtray closer and gazed out over the rooftops of Algiers. The impression was of a pale blue quilt, the square top of each house shining after a recent shower, reflecting the colour of the sky. It was a city of rooftops. In the distance he could see the sea looking like a sheet of zinc, calm under the departing rain clouds. The scene had the loveliness of any hot, dry country after it has been rinsed with rain.

It was good to be in a foreign city. He could have sat there gazing over the rooftops for hours. He had the sensation that he was surveying his own territory – own not in the sense of owning but belonging. This was his true home: a hotel room with a big ashtray, a solid desk and a splendid window overloooking an impoverished sprawl of humanity. And not just his home but his proper life, his modus vivendi. The city below was like a ploughed field busy germinating the fruits it would soon yield.

It was good, too, to be alone. For the first time he felt liberated from Saskia, his ex-fiancée, and sure it was right that they had separated. With a continent and a sea between them, he could cease worrying. He hadn't acted badly, it wasn't a failing on his part to have left rather than undertake a commitment that scared him more and more.

Mortimer felt he ought to be picking up the telephone and making a call but he had forgotten to whom, and why. Then it came back to him: room service, that was all. The week's work over, all copy filed, at least for the moment: time for a little reward, a glass of the sweet pink milk known as a *frappé*. He smiled inwardly when he

remembered: nothing more onerous than that. It was good to have work under his own control: a cigarette, a notebook and a pink milkshake: all he needed.

The phone rang and he picked up the heavy black receiver, relic of an earlier decade.

‘Nice. Very nice.’ It was Kepple, the *Tribune*’s foreign editor, calling from London.

‘How on earth do you know already?’ Mortimer asked. He had finished giving his copy to London only minutes before.

‘I read it as Mildred took it down,’ Kepple replied.

‘Well, don’t start thinking such zeal gives you any special editorial rights,’ Mortimer said.

‘The “Great Wall of Africa”,’ Kepple chuckled. ‘Excellent. That’ll be the headline. You’ll have to give us a few more on the region.’

‘Of course,’ Mortimer blurted without thinking.

Just the day before, Mortimer had returned to Algiers from the Western Sahara, where the Rio Camello guerrillas were fighting Morocco for a disputed territory. The war had been going on a year with barely a mention in the press. But recently the Moroccans had built a three-hundred-mile wall of sand across the desert in an attempt to keep out the guerrillas. It wasn’t much more than a bulldozed dyke the height of a man, with military posts strung along it, but it was still a remarkable story.

Mortimer hadn’t got as far as thinking where he might try to go next, but pleasure welled at the story’s having gone down well. It was his first print story for some time. It would be excellent to stay in the region for now.

‘I’ll be taking it straight up to the boss,’ Kepple went on. ‘Bloody good stuff. The reportage too.’

Mortimer had scribbled a lot of notes about the guerrillas themselves while with them, and cobbled them together into a small feature.

Kepple started quoting back Mortimer's words: '"*They lounge by the fire like wild animals in repose, giving half their attention to their tea-making, keeping half on the alert. You've never seen people so relaxed. And in the middle of the Sahara, in the middle of a war. Tolstoy was right: there's no laziness like a military life*."'

Kepple cleared his throat. 'Never fancied you for a travel writer. Nor for reading Tolstoy. We'll call that one "Tea on the Frontline", and run it alongside the main piece. I'll see if I can get the Sunday supplement interested in something too. We think you should go into the Atlas Mountains, then down south. I'll fill you in later.'

Even after five years in the trade – Mortimer would be celebrating his thirtieth birthday in a month's time – you couldn't be invited to contribute a series to the *Tribune* and not feel excited. Especially when this was his first story since his sojourn in television – a sojourn that now, already, he could see had been a hiatus in his real life. He'd always been a print man, always would be.

He'd been trying to get more foreign assignments for years. Mortimer had always longed to be a roving reporter. It was obvious to him: the thing to do with one's life was to travel. One had been given a number of decades in this sunny, tragic world – what else to do but explore and report back on what you saw? He couldn't imagine a greater freedom, and purpose with it. You had your notebook, your biro, your passport: you went where the wars were, and the earthquakes and famines.

His first few years in the papers had been nothing like that. He'd had the odd assignment abroad, and would come back bursting with a triumph of news-making, only to find the editor hadn't yet run it, and see it shunted day after day until it was out of date.

Most of the time was spent regurgitating information one had been given, and meanwhile dropping cigarette ends in half-drunk cups of coffee that had gone cold on the

desk, or banging out paragraphs for other people's pieces where the editor wanted a change in angle, or driving through rain in small cars with overweight men from the paper who didn't bathe enough, eating Indian meals with them, sitting at pub tables crowded with glasses. All of which might represent a measure of his having arrived, or at least having got started – and also, he reflected occasionally, when in good spirits, that he was in the midst of an apprenticeship, was learning his trade on the job – but it was a far cry from the global scope, the dusty suit, scuffed notebook and leaky local biro in a hot country, that he had once imagined.

Mortimer reflected how odd it was that he had had to move to television in order to be wanted, rather than tolerated, by a newspaper. There was no end to the respect television commanded. His year in it had been only a modest success, yet it had totally changed his status with the papers.

A month back he'd had a drink with Kepple, the *Tribune*'s foreign editor, in a bleak pub on the Gray's Inn Road.

'Why are we meeting here?' he'd asked.

'Scoping the new watering holes. In case we move.' The paper had been talking about moving from its Fleet Street premises for some time. 'So things didn't pan out on the small screen?' Kepple asked. 'Can't imagine why you'd want to leave it.'

'It wasn't my cup of tea.'

'I thought everyone wanted to be on the box.'

Mortimer shrugged. 'Not me.'

'Well, Bill told me to work something out' – Bill being the paper's proprietor. 'Says you were one of the good ones to watch. I've got just the ticket if you want it. Desert nomads turn guerrilla fighters. Starting up a righteous war all their own in the Sahara.'

'I'll need decent money,' he'd said.

‘Bill is constitutionally disinclined towards new salaries this month, so he says,’ Kepple had replied. ‘He likes retainers better. Perfect for you. A decent retainer, and fees per story.’

‘And expenses?’

‘Expenses too, of course.’

Mortimer had gratefully taken on the job. It was just what he had been hoping for.

The Saharan assignment had also been just what he needed when it came to Saskia. With things being over with her, and his therefore being free to go, free as never before. And his needing to. Saskia had delivered a string of ultimatums on which he had failed to deliver, and at last she had meant it, and packed his bags for him. He had moved into the spare room of a friend, a lawyer with a young family. Mortimer’s presence in that already fraught domesticity was too much: it had been an untenable situation. And on top of that, the English winter had been drawing on interminably. March already, and no sign of the sun since Christmas, hardly.

I’m like a mariner, Mortimer told his friends, I’m away too much. And when I’m not away I’m looking to go away. I never know when I’ll be off next. It’s no life for a partner. Saskia’s done the right thing.

Or sometimes he said: *we*’ve done the right thing. Because it was mutual, more or less. True, it was he who had become ever more remote, ever less able to settle into home life, ever more fearful of the looming commitment, but it was she who had called their mutual bluff. And once they had started talking openly, it became clear they felt equally equivocal.

At least that was what they told themselves. He sometimes wondered if the real problem hadn’t been different. He would think of their last formal talk about calling it all off. Formal was the word. They’d sat in her sitting room talking about the need to set one another free

for something better. Mostly she had talked. He had listened, and in some way none of what they were saying had seemed true, or even important. He'd had the sense that they were putting up words like so much smoke, and the real story had nothing to do with what they said. They were wasting their breath. The truth, the real course of events, would come along regardless of their words. He'd felt an urgency to get away, as if only away from her, and away from their home, would he be able to order his thoughts and reconnect with the truth of the situation; and then be able to say the right things.

That had never happened. He had simply left.

And there had been the house too, his claustrophobia in it. It was her house, but within a few months of their meeting he had given up his shabby Bayswater studio, never much more than a place to lay his head, and transferred the rent to her mortgage. Sometimes he'd come in from the news desk at night and his first instinct would be to turn round and leave. It wasn't her; it was the house: to be boxed in a dark container of brick in the no man's land between the city centre and the suburbs, the transitional zone of endless terraces, some brick, some stucco, with the West End only twenty minutes away, but equally with a row of local shops at the end of the street, marking this as a district unto itself; and all the families clunking shut their doors each night on the world, sealing themselves in their own chambers: it was a frightening way to pass one's life. But then after half an hour with his feet propped on an afghan cushion, sprawled on the spread of kelims, with two or three glasses of wine inside him, he'd begin to feel, amid the ethnic clutter of the household – which was all her doing – a sense of calm again, of his life making sense, and of this home making a kind of sense. Sometimes he could almost have called the house a haven, a place of retreat. At least, he could understand how others

might. He didn’t think that he himself was a man who needed a retreat.

He told himself it was the perfect arrangement: he had taken a look at commitment, given it enough of a shot to know it wasn’t for him, had cured himself of the dumb couple-hunger that afflicted so many of his generation, and would no longer hanker after the dull solace of domesticity.

Then along came a Saharan war on a plate, and an offer from a newspaper: there had been no decision.

2

INSTEAD OF CALLING room service, he decided to go down in person. He'd have his pink milkshake in the lobby lounge.

The Al Asra was Algiers' most distinguished hotel, a colonial legacy built like a municipal edifice of provincial France, which it more or less had been, with thick masonry, shutters on every window, and a mansard roof tall and steep enough to have two tiers of dormer windows, one of which was his.

The lounge, an area of low marquetry tables, stiff silk settees and ornate trellis-work, spread around the lobby, up and down changes in floor level. It all looked mock Arabic, rather than what it was, Arabic, and was all but deserted just now: a table of men drinking glasses of tea, and a blonde woman over in a far corner.

Mortimer stumbled as he took a step. The woman looked up from her book, and he recognised her as a French photographer who had been down in the desert the previous week, in the Rio Camello camps. He had hardly spoken to her then. There had been a pack of journalists covering a congress the guerrillas were holding, and he had seen her only once, and had noticed her because she was pretty.

When his glass of sweet milk arrived on its saucer he picked it up on impulse and walked towards her, threading through the tables and chairs of the dark interior, inspired to approach her by a feeling of bonhomie towards other journalists, kindled by his coup at the foreign desk. But as he made his way over, his mood changed to something nearer alarm. An acute shyness seized him. He couldn't now imagine spontaneously beginning an easy conversation with her, he would quickly have to prepare an opening line.

He wished he hadn’t already got up and committed himself to speaking to her, or had waved or nodded first, done something to pave the way. Why was he nervous? He had nearly been married, he wasn’t some teenage ingénue, he made adequate money, he’d held down decent jobs: there was no need for this unease. He had already thought of a good first line, back when he had been sitting down and not worrying. He racked his brains for it now, and when he did miraculously find it, it no longer seemed a good line at all. But he was already upon her, he had to use it.

‘Makes a change from the desert, doesn’t it?’ he said with an inward groan.

She looked up from the book in her lap, then down again, and snapped it shut. ‘The desert?’

‘We met, remember? With the Rio Camello.’ He felt aggrieved: surely she couldn’t have forgotten meeting him. True, they had done no more than shake hands, but there hadn’t been that many foreigners down there. And he himself might be an unknown but his paper at least was famous. Another reason he’d noted her was that someone had told him she was working for *Le Monde*.

Perhaps she felt she needed to be discreet about having been there, Rio Camello being a sensitive issue locally. He felt himself blush.

‘Well, do you want to sit down?’ She smiled. ‘What is your drink, by the way?’

He tried to make a joke: ‘My drink? Scotch and soda.’ There was an uneasy pause. ‘That’s my drink. What’s yours?’

‘At this time of day? Water.’ She frowned at his glass of pink milk. ‘You’re telling me that’s a Scotch?’

He laughed, out of nervousness. ‘This is some strange milkshake. They dye it pink and load it up with sugar. I rather like it.’ He nearly got back on firm ground then, but when she again invited him to sit down, and he did, there