Almost Home

The Oscar Wilde ferry rested in the Wexford harbour with its engines idling.  The photographer sent by the State asked Slattery and Tarrant to step out of the picture.  The big men shuffled aside, leaving Ali framed by the heavy doors at the back of the ship.  The photographer used a flash, even though the day was bright.  Ali gave his famous cheesy grin and two thumbs up to the man with the Nikon.

“I want say thank you to Ireland.”

The photographer turned away to fill out the details in his notebook.

“I have so happy in Ireland.  Many times happy.  People good.  Weather good.  Guinness good...”

Tarrant scowled and said, “Give it a rest.”  He knew that Mahfouz spoke perfect English and this endless act was beginning to annoy him.

Slattery had the tickets and passports in a zipped pouch.  He also had papers that identified their status as private contractors, signed by the Minister himself.  In another pouch, plastic tie handcuffs, for use in extreme circumstances.  Force would be a last resort.

The photographer got into his Audi and drove away.  The men walked up the sloping steel roadway, Slattery on the left, Tarrant on the right, and Ali Mahfouz dwarfed in the middle.  From the rear, he looked like a small child going on holiday with a pair of muscular uncles.

The cabin had four bunks, a dressing table and a tiny bathroom.  The room hummed as the turbine spun in the space below their feet.  There was no porthole.  The air was fresh, but unmoving.  The bed sheets were clean and the towels neatly folded.  It was quite pleasant, overall, and Ali nodded his approval.

“We’re travellin’ in style, boys.” he said, “We’re on a mighty journey.”

Slattery laughed, but Tarrant just sniffed his disapproval.  He blocked Ali into a corner and barked in a South London accent, peppered with words a foreigner might not easily understand.

“Alright, sunshine.  A few pointers.  You be a good boy and we’ll treat you right.  Any hanky-panky... We’re not coppers, comprendo?  I can and I will smack you, and if I smack you, you will remember it.”  Tarrant produced the plastic cuffs.  He held them up like a flight attendant explaining safety procedures.  “Start playing silly buggers, this is what you get.”

Ali slipped off his shoes and climbed the ladder to an upper bunk. He lay down and looked at the ceiling tiles.

He was seventeen when he arrived in Ireland, and he made friends everywhere, instantly.  He told people he was a medical student and his Facebook picture showed an eager young man standing outside the College of Surgeons with a bundle of books - two of which were telephone directories.  His youth carried him through the first couple of years.  The men he met on George’s Street were mostly kind.  They gave him gifts and allowed him to sleep on their sofas. Back then, in the Tiger years, everybody had money. A professor in Trinity College gave him two hundred Euros and urged him to buy a ticket back to Tangier, but he bought an iPod instead.  He walked around Dublin with the little white buds tucked into his ears, even though he never learned how to load the device with music.

The ship rose and fell and Ali considered how much rain it would take to fill an ocean. That was the thing he liked most about Ireland.  The rain.  The way it lashed down and swept around you in circles.  Moroccan rain had the light touch of tiny baby fingers, but Irish rain was a smack from an open hand, a watery assault, a fight in liquid form.

Every now and then Ali looked over the edge of his bunk to see Tarrant slowly turning the pages on a Buy&Sell magazine, occasionally circling advertisements with a red pen.

Ali thought of the jobs he had done during his stay in Ireland.  He had worked for two Egyptian brothers, slicing kebab meat into a half-moon pan.  He had power-washed cars, scrubbed pots and wiped down tables.  He had sold Christmas trees, door to door, in November and for eighteen months he worked in the meatpacking plant where he picked up the best of his Irish expressions:

“Soft day, tough shite and did your Mammy make any more like you?”

Eventually he slept, and when he awoke, Tarrant and Slattery were moving around the cabin, preparing for disembarkation.

“Wakey-wakey!”

“Eggs and bakey.”  Ali replied.

Slattery laughed, but Tarrant remained stony faced, as always.

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It was nine hours later when Ali made his first attempt at escape.  They were in a service station somewhere near Bordeaux, eating limp sandwiches and drinking Orangina.

 Ali jumped up and ran to a nearby table where a small intense woman picked at her food. “Help me,” he begged her in French, “these men are foreign soldiers and they have abducted me on French soil.  Somebody must help me.”

“Get back here,” Tarrant demanded.

“Is this true?”  The woman asked.

Slattery wiped his mouth with a serviette, smiled at the woman, and then spoke in perfect French.

“Madame, we are legally deporting this man from the Republic of Ireland.  We have made two previous attempts to remove him from our country by air, but on each occasion, he was disruptive and alarmed the other passengers by calling out, “I am a jihadi.  I have a bomb and I will blow up this plane”.

Ali gave the woman a broad smile, which she did not return.  Slattery continued.

“If you feel we are doing anything that contravenes French law, you must of course contact the local gendarmerie.  We will hand this man over to their custody, and he will become your responsibility”.  Slattery put heavy emphasis on “votre responsabilité”.  The woman frowned. Ali gave her a hopeful two thumbs up, but she just shook her head and returned to her cold ravioli.

In the car, Tarrant caught Ali’s attention in the rear-view mirror; he growled like a dog.  Slattery took the handcuffs out of his pouch and tied Ali’s wrists together.

“Your French is very good,” Ali said

“Thank you,” Slattery replied.

Ali studied the Irishman and noticed he wasn't wearing a wedding band, though he was probably in his mid-thirties and quite handsome.  There was always the possibility that they had crossed paths on George’s Street, but Slattery's eyes gave nothing away.

Ali’s second escape attempt occurred when he requested a bathroom stop just south of Salamanca.  They pulled into a *Tangerina* and parked under a giant sign that said ‘Autogrill’.  An articulated truck rumbled past as they walked across the wide concrete forecourt.  In an instant, Ali ducked down and dashed under the body of the trailer, barely dodging the moving wheels. He ran, his hands still bound, with no idea where he was going. He zigzagged around parked cars and squeezed through the tight spaces between tourist buses.  A towbar caught him in the shin; the pain was instant and crippling.  He hobbled around the back of a bright yellow furniture van and ran straight into Tarrant’s fist, a wall made of bone and skin.  He crumpled to the gravel in agony; Tarrant stood over him, cursing.

“Sneaky little bastard!”

Ali licked his lips and tasted blood.  Slattery said, “easy now,” and it wasn’t entirely clear to whom he was speaking.

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The burnt scrub of southern Spain was slowly lost to the night.  Ali stared sideways out the window, and watched the cars crawl past in the fast lane.  Tarrant slept beside him, like a best friend leaning in for comfort, his head resting on Ali’s shoulder.  The journey was almost over: Two more hours by road to Tarifa, and then thirty minutes on the ferry to Tangier.  Ali spoke to himself, and indirectly, to Slattery.

"In Tangier, ten years ago, they caught me in bed with another boy. Half his right foot was missing... a Mobylette accident, you know, but apart from that, he was quite beautiful.  They brought him to the prison in Sidi Moussa and beat him with steel rods.  He lost an eye and most of his teeth."

Slattery glanced in the mirror.

“They will bring me to the same place,” Ali said.

“We have assurances from your government,” Slattery replied.

Ali smiled. “You should know by now you can’t trust a Moroccan.”

Tarrant made a snorting noise and burrowed deeper into Ali’s shoulder. The dark sky ripped in places and lightness showed through.  Slattery turned on the air conditioner, to catch the morning heat before it started.

"Did I tell you my theory about Ireland?" Ali asked.

Slattery shook his head.

"Ireland is like the man who invites people to his house for a feast, and then discovers he does not have enough food.  He tries to hide his humiliation with anger.  He shouts and curses at his guests and forces them out into the night.”

“You weren’t a guest,” Slattery said, “You were an illegal alien.”

At 11am, the three men stood on the deck of a high-speed ferry that cut the Mediterranean like a scissors through cloth.  Slattery had wiped the blood from Ali’s chin with a paper towel, but the plastic cuffs remained in place.

“Bloody hot,” Tarrant said, making no attempt to remove his jacket.

The journey was so quick, it felt more like a river than a sea crossing.  The white hill of houses, cut by a band of trees, rose up over the horizon.

“Tangier!” Tarrant reacted as if he had been expecting somewhere else.

 Slattery patted Ali on the shoulder and said, “Almost home”.

Ali thought about his mother and sisters and the cramped apartment in Beni Makada. How they raised two thousand Euros just to spirit him out of the country, and how he never paid a cent of it back.  It was shameful.  And now, three years in jail ahead of him.  Food, clothing and bribes, how much more money would they have to find to save him from being eaten alive?

“Almost,” Ali said, raising his cuffed hands to give his companions two thumbs up. “Almost”.

The smile was still on Ali’s lips when he vaulted the railing.  He hung in the air for a moment before accelerating downwards, his thumbs still pointing upwards.  A woman screamed, a crewmember raised the alarm and the ship's engines stopped. Slattery and Tarrant rushed to the rail and looked over. There was no sign of Ali.

Underwater, the world was quiet. The shadow cast by the boat overhead looked like a dark cloud on a grey sky. Some tiny fish seemed inquisitive; they circled the falling man for a moment and then departed.

The strength of the water surprised Ali, the way it pulled him down; he couldn’t fight it even if he wanted to. He wondered how long it would hold him under; would it be for hours or days? Would it eventually toss him on a sandy beach or would it pull him into the stream that endlessly circles the earth. He swallowed a mouthful and then he swallowed some more. It didn’t taste that bad and it reminded him of something, something that made him smile – if you closed your eyes, it was just like Irish rain.