

City Tales



Stephen Connolly

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A Traveller's Tale

Anton Göbler made his last voyage today, a distance of not quite two miles. Short compared to the journeys that made him famous and also slow, Anton weighing several tonnes, once you included the granite base. With the help of a dozen large men (plus van) from the city's Parks Department, Anton left the dusty square in which he was placed a hundred years ago. By evening his bronze face, green with age, was gazing at our city's main train station, surrounded by late commuters.

It was Anton's wealthy family who made his adventuring life possible. Anton grew up reading tales of Stanley and Livingstone, Burton and Speke: red blooded men who discovered vast tracts of land while facing down recalcitrant natives. Young Anton dreamt of becoming an explorer himself and fixed on the goal of discovering the legendary Lake Alph, reputedly the source of all the waters of sub-Saharan Africa. As soon as he came of age, Anton ignored the advice of his family and used his inheritance to finance an expedition. Six months later he disembarked from his ship on the East coast of Africa, instantly falling in love with his first sight of the country. Six weeks later a party of Sukuma porters deposited young Anton on the shores of what was probably Lake Victoria. Sadly, the light dancing on the water was the last thing Anton ever saw. For during the journey up country – having a delicate constitution – he had unfortunately succumbed to some of the most devastating vermin and virulent infections known to man. He was dead within the hour.

At first the porters did not know what to do with his body. It had been a long and tiring journey and there was now nobody to give them orders. Eventually, their headman had an idea.

Being all too familiar with the Lake (the reason he had been hired in the first place), the headman persuaded his fellows that they were now free to do some exploring of their own. After a day's rest they picked up their burdens – including the late Anton – and set off to visit the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, which they had heard of but never seen. After a day or so exploring the ruins, they handed over the remains of young Anton to some local Matabele and headed home. These Matabele also felt a sudden desire for exploring. They picked up young Anton's remains – now beginning to look the worse for wear – and set off for the mysterious Mapungubwe, on the banks of the distant Limpopo river, a place they had heard of but never visited. After spending some time there they handed over the body to some local Venda and turned for home. The Venda, intrigued in their turn, took charge of young Anton and began planning their own expedition.

And so it went on. As the months and years went by, Anton – his body undergoing a slow, natural mummification – criss-crossed the continent in fits and starts, passed from tribe to tribe, nation to nation.

What inspired each tribe, each clan to begin their journey? We can never know. But it remains a fact that no sooner had anyone set eyes on Anton's body than they were seized with a

desire to visit far away places. Perhaps his death provoked a sense of guilt, a reminder that he had given his life to do something they had never bothered about, driven by curiosity about a landscape they themselves took for granted.

Whatever the true reason the late Anton had soon visited more glorious and mysterious places than he could ever have imagined while alive. And while he never reached the legendary (and in fact non-existent) Lake Alph, the places he did visit more than made up for it: the lost pyramids of the Sudan, the rock paintings of the Amahaggar, the ruins of Kör, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, the terrifying source of the Green Nile.

Over the years rumours of his wanderings reached Western ears and slowly the story was put together, for Anton's remains have never been seen by a European since the day he left the coast all those years ago. And who knows? Perhaps even now Anton continues his eternal voyage, at the head of some band of cheerful explorers, inspiring everyone he meets with a thirst for travel.

So, Anton Göbler's statue completed its last journey and now stands (appropriately enough) opposite the city's fine new train station. A fine tribute to perhaps the greatest ever African explorer, although (so far) nobody who has seen it has been inspired to travel any further than the out of town supermarket, some 5 miles away.

Fog

The fog had blighted the city for decades. It filled the streets, it invaded shops and houses, it slipped into theatres and halted the plays.

Worst of all the fog obliterated the city from the first floor upwards: centuries of beautiful architecture invisible even at the height of Summer.

Many blamed the fog on pollution from too many cars and factories, others on Global Warming and everybody blamed the government for doing nothing about it.

Unable to prevent the fog, the City Tourism Board learned to accommodate it, hiring guides to describe the city's invisible architecture to tourists. But this had its own drawbacks. Most of the guides were students who spent so much time in the city's bars that on some mornings they were in no fit state to describe anything to anybody. Also, they knew little more about the city's architecture than the tourists, so mistakes were frequent.

One August morning, a hungover student by the name of Carl stood beneath the city's late Renaissance Town hall, his mind blank as to what he was supposed to be describing. He looked from the fog above to his clients - a flock of dull farmers - and back again.

Then he remembered a documentary he'd recently seen on TV, and having no other option, described to the tourists the Great Pyramid rising out of sight above their heads. The tourists were so impressed that as the tour continued, Carl added other architectural Wonders whenever he forgot what was actually above them.

Counting his tips at the end of the day, Carl realised he was on to something. That night, instead of carousing, he visited the University library for the first time in months for some serious research. Next day, faced with an even duller group of tourists, he ignored the official guidebook altogether and populated the heights of the city with the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The Town Hall again received the Great Pyramid, but the 19th Century Post Office gained the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the modernist train station gained the Temple of Artemis.

Once again the tour was a success and at its conclusion Carl's fellow guides were astonished to see his patrons showering him with cash. That night, over drinks in a favourite bar, Carl revealed all to his comrades. Some were furious but most saw the funny side, not to mention the financial one.

Next day, Carl's comrades followed his example and during their tours populated the city with the most fantastical of skylines. Many stuck to the Seven Wonders, but a few added other favourites, including the Taj Mahal, The Empire State Building, the Mosque of Hagia Sophia and even the Forth Rail Bridge.

The tourists returned home delighted by what they'd seen, or at least heard described. If any of them had doubts about the city's wonders, they kept them to themselves. Most sang the city's praises to their friends, encouraging them to plan visits of their own.

Visitor numbers mushroomed and all went well until inevitably questions were asked. Many Tourists completed forms providing feedback about their holiday and officials grew suspicious when the same unlikely buildings began appearing in the paperwork.

The Tourism Board held an investigation and hauled the guides in for questioning. Carl quickly confessed, offering his resignation and the money he had accumulated. The Board read the riot act to all of them and the tours returned to truthful normality.

Naturally, visitor numbers plummeted and the city's hoteliers and restaurateurs complained: they had grown used to the city's new popularity. Business hadn't been so good in years and they were furious at the sudden drop in takings.

The Tourism Board reconsidered. Eventually the guides were summoned again and ordered to resume their 'alternate' architecture, with instructions to broaden their repertoire: a delegation of French businessmen was due on an official visit and it was felt only polite to include some familiar buildings for their enjoyment.

So all is now well in our city, despite the ever-present Fog. Tourists enjoy a stimulating and informative holiday, Carl and his fellow students are gainfully employed and the hospitality industry goes from strength to strength.

Even we ordinary citizens have begun imagining what lies above us: the Fog has been with us for so long, who can say with any certainty what's actually up there? Other cities are restricted to a single, fixed skyline, but we enjoy as many as we are capable of imagining.

And the only worry is, what will we do should the Fog ever lift?

Gustav Carlson's Autumn Leaves

The painting had been in the city for less than a month when Johansen decided to steal it.

Not because he liked it or because it was valuable or because he was a criminal. Johansen was a respectable accountant, lived frugally and could not tell one picture from another. No, Johansen decided to steal the painting to outdo his brother Peter.

Peter was the youngest of the family, spoiled by their parents all his life. Where Johansen had studied hard and got a steady job, Peter had drifted around, frittering his money on strong drink and loose women, but somehow always falling on his feet.

Johansen loathed his brother, mainly for the trouble he had caused their parents down the years, but also (though he would never have admitted it) for the fun he always seemed to have, the good fortune that always shone upon him. So when Peter - living at home due to some 'temporary' financial difficulties - acquired a print of Gustav Carlson's 'Autumn Leaves' and hung it in his parents' dining room, Johansen decided to steal the original.

The theft proved simpler than he could ever have imagined, considering he had no experience of crime. On the following Saturday, Johansen visited the City Art Gallery for a reconnaissance. To his amazement, the building seemed deserted. Unknown to him, it was the day of the cup final - Johansen had no interest in football - and the city was buzzing; anyone who didn't have a ticket was glued to the nearest TV set. The police had been busy all day keeping rival fans apart, out of the bars and moving towards the Stadium.

Johansen eventually found staff and visitors tucked away in an office watching the match on TV. They were far too busy to notice him so he hurried to the gallery containing Gustav Carlson's 'Autumn Leaves', stepped over a rail and removed the painting from the wall. Five minutes later, he was walking out of the building with the canvas rolled up beneath his arm.

'DISGRACEFUL!' the newspapers screamed as the police searched in vain for the painting and the thief.

'Genius!' Peter declared as the family ate their Sunday dinner beneath their print of 'Autumn Leaves'. 'Walking out with it in the middle of the match? Genius!'

This would all have been balm to Johansen's soul, had he not been furious at his portrayal in the media. According to the police spokesman, the images caught on the gallery's CCTV footage showed a man so unremarkable that there was little hope of identifying him.

Unremarkable? thought Johansen. Me?

Alone in his apartment, he gazed at Gustav Carlson's 'Autumn Leaves', feeling more resentment than triumph.

The next step was probably inevitable.

‘Don’t be so hard on him,’ Johansen’s father protested as they bickered over yet another mess from which Peter had had to be expensively rescued. ‘He’s just naïve.’

Johansen scowled at the print of ‘Autumn Leaves’ hanging on the wall. And once again inspiration struck.

‘SUCCESS!’ the newspapers blazed when Peter was arrested. And if the police were puzzled by his lack of resemblance to the figure in the CCTV footage, at least - thanks to Johansen’s cunning substitution - they had found his fingerprints on the painting.

There was a sensational trial, during which Peter’s disreputable past was brought up in court and blasted across the press. He was quickly convicted and given a lengthy prison sentence.

Johansen comforted his heartbroken parents, confident that he would soon take his rightful place as the head of the family.

And then Gustav Carlson died.

Within days, the value of all his paintings had shot up. ‘Autumn Leaves’ was sold for an immense sum and the newspapers had a field day.

‘DISGRACEFUL!’ they screamed and in furious editorials they protested at the exorbitant prices of paintings when ordinary people were going without.

And to Johansen’s horror, Peter became the hero of the hour.

‘A MODERN DAY ROBIN HOOD!’ the newspapers called him and began a campaign for his release. A technicality was found in the original trial which led to an appeal. In a gush of popular sentiment, Peter was pardoned and released.

The new owner of Gustav Carlson’s ‘Autumn Leaves’ died and in his will bequeathed the painting to the city. Within a month it was back in the Art Gallery, on the very wall from which Johansen had stolen it. The Gallery even asked Peter to the unveiling.

Johansen took to drink, convinced that he would never be free of the cursed painting.

At the unveiling ceremony Peter met a society girl and after a whirlwind romance, they married. Her father gave Peter a job writing for his newspaper, and Johansen found himself having to read Peter’s opinions on a daily basis.

Johansen’s drinking reached alarming levels, he lost his job and his world fell apart. Finally, one terrible day he was arrested while attempting to throw acid over the painting that had so blighted his life.

Peter and his new wife came to visit him in the secure hospital to which he had been confined.

They brought with them a present: a print of a famous painting. As Johansen was fast asleep, Peter left it propped up at the foot of the bed, so that it would be the first thing Johansen saw when he woke up.

Cargo

Tap, tap, tap.

Milo climbs the final stairs, legs aching, ears cocked, determined to locate the source of the noise.

Tap, taptaptap, tap, tap.

He'd woken at 6, crazy early as Grandpa would say, the distant sounds like fingers tapping on the inside of his head.

'Can you hear that?' he'd asked at breakfast.

'Hear what?' said Grandpa from behind his newspaper.

'Eat your toast.' said Mother.

Mother was soon gone, to whatever she did in the city, leaving him to Grandpa. Who was soon fast asleep, leaving him to explore.

Tap, tap, TAP, tap.

Milo has run out of stairs, of breath. Before him stands the final attic door, right at the top of the rattlesome building, a room he has never entered. Milo reaches for the handle, which should be locked.

But isn't.

Inside, Milo forgets the miracle of the unlocked door. A flock, a school, a squadron of coloured Balloons jostle and squeak outside the vast attic window.

TAP, TAP, TAP, TAP.

The balloons carry ballast, small items which tap against the glass. Odd things: lengths of bone, pencil sharpeners. A battery, a pen. Each tied to its respective balloon with string, thread even ribbon.

Each balloon carries a scrap of ragged paper.

Within seconds Milo has opened the window, shepherded them inside and begun investigating. Each scrap of paper bears a drawing, small but intriguing. And somehow two hours have passed and Grandpa is calling him for lunch.

As he leaves, Milo looks back through the window. In the far distance upwind lies a dark smudge on the landscape. The Camp, notorious from the TV news. Filled with refugees from the East. Half-savages, wild people, invaders.

'Grandpa! Look what I *found!*'

* * *

Milo will never forgive Grandpa for squealing on him.

He stares out of his bedroom window, lip wobbling. Below, Grandpa feeds the punctured balloons, the scraps of paper, even the ballast into the flames of a brazier as Mother stands behind, making sure.

She has been quite specific. The attic is now firmly locked, and strictly out of bounds. The Camp is not to be discussed.

Milo has been hearing about it and its occupants for as long as he can remember. People driven from their homes by conflict, come West in search of... anything. Food, water, a roof over their head, a chance of survival. A future. They have no money, they don't work. 'They contribute nothing to society'.

Milo remembers the pictures on the scraps of paper, the squiggles of words in a foreign script. He loves to draw, but he has never managed anything so beautiful, he feels shame that his first reaction to them had been envy. Now he just misses them, wonders about their creator, imagining a small exotic person clutching a pencil, somewhere in the distant Camp.

Can they all draw? Milo wonders. And wakes at dawn to a disappointment of birdsong.

They were beautiful. Animals and birds and boats and cars and things he doesn't recognise but yearns to know more about. Caught so easily, deftly, on scraps of paper torn from books and newspapers. So flammable.

His mother's books, Grandpa's newspapers, sawdust from the rabbit hutch. Matches from the kitchen.

Mother is at work, Grandpa asleep, Milo has plenty of time. The key to the attic is soon found in grandma's purse tucked away in a wardrobe.

Milo stares out at the Camp, barely visible through the rain. He steels himself and the fire is soon lit, just as Grandpa taught him, on an ancient breadboard nobody will miss. The forbidden attic is soon bright, he hopes the flames will be enough, that he has enough fuel to keep it going, that it serve its purpose.

An hour passes. Milo makes three trips downstairs for things, anything, that will burn. Even his own drawings, those he is most proud of.

But it's getting late, the fire is dwindling and he is reluctant to take more risks. Grandpa will wake soon, his mother will return from work, his absence will be noticed.

And then he sees it, almost afraid to look in case it's his eyes playing tricks. Balloons approaching from the East. But not in ones and twos, to *tap, tap, tap* on the window. A cluster of balloons, all sharing the weight of a single cargo. A passenger, child-sized.

Milo hurries to open the window, already anticipating the first picture they will make together.

Publishing history

'Gustav Carlson's Autumn Leaves' was first performed at 'Talking Tales' Bath Fringe, July 2017.

'Fog' was first published in the Bath Spa University Anthology 'A Place In Words', September 2017.

'Cargo' was performed at Stroud Short Stories, November 2018, and published by Fictive Dream, February 2019.

About the author

Stephen Connolly was born in Canada in 1964, but grew up in Scotland and South Africa. He now lives in the Cotswolds.

He began writing short stories in the late 90s before discovering Radio Drama and writing and recording his own plays for Cirencester's Corinium Radio. He graduated with an MA in Scriptwriting from Bath Spa University in 2015.

His plays have been performed at Bristol, Brighton, Salisbury, Stroud, Gloucester and London. His radio play 'Sky Pilots' was joint winner of the 2018 BBC Solent Radio Playwrights competition and broadcast on BBC Radio Solent. His first stage play 'Parzival' will be produced by Bristol Old Vic in 2020.

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