

The  
**C**anticle  
of Ibiza  
*a novel*

JUSTIN KURIAN



## **The Canticle of Ibiza**

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## ONE



he waiter wore only a magenta speedo and sparkling silver wig.

Not anything wrong with this garb necessarily, but not the usual one John was accustomed to from a service staff member. Or from anyone, for that matter. Apparently no one else worked here but this remarkably lithe man, and, considering the wrinkles emerging from his eyes, he might even be the owner.

Now the cafe itself was certainly nothing special—a few wobbly tables balanced on the dusty sidewalk, and a peeling white storefront housed a grumbling coffee machine suffering from bouts of indigestion.

This cafe, located on a side street in Santa Eulària, did not bother with such trivial details as a sign, so its name remained

a mystery. Against all odds though, it possessed a certain charm. The lovely Mediterranean morning exuded warmth, with clean blue skies expanding above. Shockingly fresh air whisked off the sea, and one could bask in the view of this sea, only a short block away, from its rickety chairs. John would drink his tea here.

He sat alone, with no other patrons present.

His move to Ibiza just the night previous, directly from his pricey but chilly apartment in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, had left him dazed and confused. He had sold his apartment for the initial offer received a mere forty-two minutes after placing it on the market. His appalled real estate agent turned an off-green as he insisted they could get far, far more money by waiting—perhaps even double—but John was desperate to evacuate.

The harsh realization that he lacked any solid plans once he arrived on this island now slapped him with authority. He knew not a soul on Ibiza save Gunther, and he had not seen or heard from Gunther in fifteen long years. But rumors suggested Gunther lived somewhere on the island, and John needed to find him. Only Gunther ever had the answers.

As he sipped his milky tea, she stealthily arrived.

Her age and nationality were impossible to determine. Quite tan, she wore immense sunglasses that concealed half her face, and a sunhat that shrouded the remainder in shadow. The blazing colors of her flowing sundress distracted the eye. What part of her tan was genetic, and what resulted from the burning Spanish sun, was difficult to discern. Of the two remaining tables, she chose the farthest one from John.

After removing her hat and placing it on the table, then applying maroon lipstick several times, all movement ceased. Even the coffee machine stopped distressing.

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Although her head was turned slightly away, John could not avoid the feeling that she studied him from behind those opaque lenses. A protrusion of her neck tendons made him suspect eyes were aimed at his person.

“Do you always behave so appallingly?” she asked in perfect English.

The words carried crisply through the empty street. He realized, with a jolt, that she addressed him.

“Me?”

“Well, I’m not talking to the owner.”

“I suppose you’re not.”

“So do you always behave like this?”

“Like what?”

She turned to him. “So damned self-absorbed.”

“I’m self-absorbed?”

“Absolutely.”

“I am alone at a cafe on an abandoned street watching the tumbleweeds. Self-absorption tends to occur.”

“No excuse.”

“Would it help if I told you I was thinking of my kindly but deceased grandmother?”

She heartily laughed, tilting back and displaying an oversized column of flawless white teeth, gums prominent on top.

“You are American?”

“And so are you.”

She laughed again. “Now this is rare. We have the Dutch, Germans, English, and Scandinavians visiting this island, and of course the native Spanish, but Americans are far and few between. It’s simply too far away.”

Spindly green weeds peeking through the sidewalk cracks trembled from a sea gust.

He closed his eyes, allowing morning sunlight to warm his

lids, the inside view transforming from darkness to a balmy orange. The severe squeak of a chair leg roused him.

He stared in wonder as she collected her bag and approached. Her straw-scented hat plopped onto his table and a single beige drop trickled down the side of his disturbed teacup.

Without the least bit of hesitation, she sat directly beside him. He should say something, but found himself too astonished to speak.

The odor of coconut lotion dominated. Her peculiar tan, or perhaps sunburn, had a purplish tint. Veins along her neck, which he now realized was quite sinewy, revealed an older age, probably early sixties. She kept herself so tanned and obscured it was impossible to gauge. Images of aging actresses from the golden age of Hollywood flooded his mind.

The nearly naked proprietor served her an espresso with lemon peel. Before turning away, he winked at her, a conspiratorial grin spanning his tanned face. Although she ignored him, her subdued amusement and tension about her lips revealed she was repressing a confirmatory grin.

The hot rush of embarrassment now seared John, as he appeared to be the naive target of some sort of inside joke or set up.

“Now. Let’s talk about you, shall we?” she said, seemingly settled in for a lengthy conversation.

Apparently, the social norms on Ibiza were a bit different than he was accustomed to.

“And what is there to talk about?”

“Your name, to start.”

“I see you commence with extremely challenging questions.”

She briefly smiled. “Name?”

He scoffed, finding her persistence amusing. “John.”

“Last name?”



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“Does it matter?”

“Last name?”

John laughed again. “Balkus.”

“Strange. You appear Italian.”

“I’m a little of everything.”

“Well, you intrigue me, John.”

“Oh? I don’t know any reason why I should.”

Her left eyebrow lifted, as she perhaps expected a more flattered response.

“I must confess something to you, John.”

“Please don’t feel obligated.”

She paused again, studying him with curiosity, and then exploded in laughter, flipping her brown hair over her shoulder. “I must. I absolutely must. And do not let this frighten you.”

“Okay.”

“When I spotted you, I absolutely thought you were the ghost of my husband.”

He had hoped for a better start on Ibiza. Perhaps it would not look too awkward if he fled right now? Although, summoning a plausible reason for his abrupt departure in such a lackadaisical atmosphere would not be easy.

“Have I frightened you?”

“We’re getting there.”

“You look just like him when he was your age. Identical. What are you, thirty-three or four?”

“Seven.”

“Your dark, wavy hair—and you are tall, with a tan color,” she said giggling. “And those khaki shorts and white shirt—just like him. Both of you attractive. Astounding! Fate at work, as I always do say. Fate at work.”

“You said I look like the ghost of him?”

“Absolutely.”

“Does that mean I appear a ghostly version of him, pale and haunted in appearance—or rather, does that mean something happened to him and I appear similar to him, but I must be a ghost in that he is no longer present?”

Her head shook side to side, clicking emerging from her gaping mouth, her glossy lips freshly licked.

“I see intelligence is not a problem of yours. Another similarity you two have,” she said with a scoff. “The answer is: something happened to him.”

“I’m sorry.”

Her chair leg squeaked.

“Well, aren’t you going to ask?”

“Ask what?”

“What happened to him. No need to play mister cool and pretend you are not the curious one.”

He thought being polite was a more accurate description, but so be it.

“So, what happened to him?”

Her tanned legs extended beneath the table. “Hopefully heaven. He died at forty-three when we were based in Beverly Hills. I’ve been here ever since.”

Still not a soul passed by. Ibiza certainly remained sleepy in late spring, a stark contrast to the mad rush he heard unleashes during the impeding summer.

The proprietor returned, and as peculiar as this might sound, he now positioned himself with his privates no more than two inches from John’s face. He stood motionless and mute.

John remained frozen. And understandingly baffled.

An awkward moment, surely, under any circumstances. What to say escaped him, and certainly he did not dare turn his way to inquire. Life, evidently, had not prepared him for all situations.

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After readjusting his nearly nonexistent bathing suit with a resounding snap, the proprietor placed a glass of red wine directly before John. The smell of crushed dark cherries overpowered.

“What’s this?”

“Your wine. Enjoy.”

Sunlight gleamed off the lengthy strands of his silver wig, making it impossible to discern his features. All was just white brightness.

“I didn’t order this.”

“Of course, you did order it, Señor.”

“I didn’t—”

“You must not be embarrassed by that fact.”

“Embarrassed?”

“Yes. Do not be embarrassed by your order.”

“What on earth? Why would I be embarrassed?” John turned to her in befuddled amusement. She simply shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

“Look, I didn’t order this. I have my tea, remember?”

“Relax, Señor.”

“But I am relaxed.”

“You do not need to be so ashamed.”

“Ashamed? What on—”

“Shame has no place here. You are on Ibiza now, not Kentucky. You would do well to remember that,” he said, patting down the fluttering strands of his wig as he walked away.

John turned to her in disbelief. “What on earth is with that guy?”

She looked aside, dismissing his inquiry.

“Did you just hear him?” John insisted. “What is he talking about?”

“So, are you just visiting for a few days like all the others, or here to stay a while?”

She definitively ignored his questions with such a perfunctory air that he questioned whether he had actually asked them.

“This cafe?”

“No,” she laughed playfully. “Ibiza.”

John sipped his tea, ignoring the fragrant wine. “I’ll be staying a while.”

Her hands tensed. “Wonderful.”

“Is it?”

“Why did you come to Ibiza?”

The orange dust coating the street and sidewalks glowed in the morning light.

“To try to begin anew, I suppose,” he finally answered. “If such things are truly possible.”

She smiled broadly, as his answer seemed to greatly please her. “How positive-minded of you.”

“Isn’t it?”

“What an American optimist.”

Surprising to hear that label. Many years had passed since someone last deemed him an optimist. It was a common designation from his university days, but certainly not from the barren years since.

“But perhaps you are a liar, John.”

He turned to her. “Oh?”

“Yes.”

“And in what form is my current prevarication manifesting?”

“Just maybe, might I suggest, you came here to escape?”

“Escape?”

She leaned forward. His reflection, clear in her enormous sunglass lenses, appeared riddled with concern.

“In my nearly fifteen years of experience here, many journey to Ibiza to discover a new way of living. Their little, eager heads bursting with hope. Nowhere on our fair planet is a better destination for that search than right here.”

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“And why might that be?”

She appeared surprised, if not hurt, by his question.

“We are standing, after all, on the landing spot of the original hippies who fled the US in the sixties.” She stomped the pavement, a gentle tangerine cloud arising. “Some disappeared to Kathmandu or Tangiers, but *here* was their prime destination. It is 1988, and yes, they are still living here. And like attracts like. So they have continually attracted other open-minded individuals from throughout Europe to create our entirely unique culture of Ibiza.”

John nodded. That particular bohemian history had undoubtedly endowed this place with a novel atmosphere, but to what extent he did not know.

“But then, many also come to escape. To escape something haunting their past. Something searing and consuming them inside.”

“Sounds uncomfortable.”

“And unfortunately, it does not always work.”

“You, for example?”

She laughed heartily. “I’m Angela by the way. And sadly, if I came to escape something, it was nothing particularly intriguing. Just the doldrums of widowhood in Los Angeles.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“You don’t get invited to the parties anymore; those uptight women fear you might prey on their ridiculous husbands.”

“So did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Prey on their unwitting husbands?”

She halted, her chair emitting a stringent squeak. All jubilation drained from her face, leaving a sour, downturned mouth.

“Hardly,” she said coolly. “I damn well respect a marriage, unlike most.”

It appears he might have misstepped.

“There is nothing more sacred, I always say, than marriage. And,” she said, striking the table with her forefinger, “I truly hope you feel the same as well.”

This sudden solemnity was quite unanticipated. He still expected her to burst into laughter. Yet she remained deathly serious, and awaited his answer in pregnant silence. He best agree.

“I do. I certainly do.”

Angela’s sunglasses bounced as she began giggling.

“What is it? What’s so funny now?”

“I’m not here to scare you, John. So don’t worry.”

Everything seemed askew. Slightly off-kilter. But he could not discern if it were the jet lag and exhaustion, or the people and place.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The weather was now warming at such an alarming rate that he consciously noted the change, something that had never happened before. He stood.

“Nice meeting you, Angela. Perhaps I’ll see you around.”

She popped up and fastened her hat. “Nonsense. Now, it’s painfully obvious you are new here.”

“Is it?”

Not only was it “obvious,” but “painfully obvious” he was new to Ibiza? That certainly did not sound like flattery. And to think he believed he was fitting in just fine.

“Let me guide you around Santa Eulària a bit. Everyone needs some help, even you.”

What “even you” meant was again ambiguous, although at least it implied he projected a decent level of competence. Unless, of course, it had been uttered in sarcasm.

Either way, he was well-accustomed in New York to having

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each minute of each day precisely mapped out. No wiggle room. A protein smoothie smelling startlingly like manure began things at 5:20 a.m. Ceaseless work consumed the day, which ended with cardiovascular on the exercise bike, always alone, in his cavernous and rather bare Manhattan apartment in late evening. More work, then a brisk shower and bed. Up at bleak 5:20 a.m. to start again, with absolutely no hits on the snooze button. A strictly forbidden indulgence. Free time, as you see, was an alien concept.

Yet now, here he was, randomly wandering Ibiza, completely liberated of any plans or obligations. From one extreme to the other, which is never easy to manage.

Side by side, John and Angela strolled down the street to the sea, their common American heritage perhaps contributing to some solidarity, as he felt no need to converse. He leaned against the rapidly warming iron rail spanning the length of the beach.

The serenity of this sea struck deeply. Not at all the hardy Atlantic John was accustomed to, with its white-foamed waves and ominous green vastness. Here, the sea, a gentle blue, barely stirred. A faint seaweed smell rode the soft breeze.

“Are you married?” Angela asked.

An abrupt question from seemingly nowhere.

“No.”

“Divorced?”

“Good heavens, you aren’t shy.”

“Shy? What gain is there in being shy?”

A few gains, perhaps, at least when it came to social situations. Such as not turning into an annoying mess too quickly. But probably best not to list them at the moment.

“No, not divorced. Long relationship, but recently ended that.”

“Did she propose to you?”

“Don’t men do the proposing?”

“Not always. Not in particular circles...like yours.”

John shook his head at her acumen. “Not bad, Angela, not bad. And yes, she did propose. A ‘merger’ she charmingly called it. I was to be ‘merged.’ A few months ago. It took that offer to shock me into the painful reality.”

“What reality?”

He cleared his throat. “The vapidness of my entire situation.”

Her fingers clenched. “So why did you refuse her offer?”

“Does that matter?”

“Yes, it does.”

“You certainly are curious.”

Somehow her gaze consumed, even though her sunglasses were impenetrable.

“After four years, I didn’t even know her preferred genre of film. The ‘relationship,’ and I use that term generously, was built on high society and money. Like my life. Either way, she started dating another high earner at my company two weeks later.”

“Sounds like a great company.”

The corner of John’s mouth lifted. “I finally, after fifteen years, freed myself of them, too. Left it all behind, and a few days later, here I stand.”

She scanned him from hair to toes. “Rather drastic of you.”

He hopped onto the warming sand.

“Do you know I have not even touched the Mediterranean yet?”

He removed his sandals and approached the sea. The beach, a sandy curve in front of the tiny city, had only three sunbathers on the distant end. The water was utterly clear, and when he dipped



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his toe into it, he felt nothing. This water felt so wonderfully warm it was undetectable.

He tossed off his shirt and submerged into this pleasure.

Underneath astounded. A marvelous school of sapphire fish darted past. Ribbons of light filtered through the water. Everything so remarkably peaceful, so serene.

On the iron rail, Angela awaited.

“How was it?”

“A glimpse of heaven.”

“Wonderful,” she said, peering at the sky. “You’re fortunate. You have come to Ibiza at the perfect time.”

“Have I?”

She exhaled, faintly whistling. “Did you know that for nine months a year, less than one hundred thousand reside on Ibiza? That’s it. And then, come summer, the population explodes to over one million.”

“Ten times increase. That is a hell of a drastic change.”

She waved her rangy fingers through the air. “In less than a month, hundreds of thousands of invaders will descend, seeking their simple summer pleasures. But you came at the right time. You have a chance to meet the genuine residents before the flood.”

“I’m fond of the beach,” John said, wryly smiling. “Maybe I’m just here for simple summer pleasures, as you say.”

“I have a powerful sense you’re not. And I’m gifted with the sixth sense.”

The squawking of several black-headed gulls gliding overhead pierced the air. John forcefully shook his head.

“What is it?”

He pulled his shirt back on, squeezing salt water from his thick hair. Although on the verge of asking an elementary question, he found himself hesitating, as a trembling sensation reverberated throughout his innards.

“Angela...”

“Yes, John? What is it?”

“Angela, do you know a Gunther Djurgenson?”

She frowned, for some reason disappointed with his inquiry.

“Gunther? No, I don’t believe so. Why?”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“Why?”

John scoffed, as he was amazed, if not aghast, at her persistence. But effective she was.

“I believe he is here. In Ibiza. Living somewhere on this island. I need to find him.”

Deep lines creased her forehead. “Ever heard of Alexander Graham Bell? Inventor of the telephone? Or at least have you written a letter to this Gunther?”

“Antonio Meucci actually invented the phone in 1849,” John said. “Graham Bell got the first patent in 1876 and took all the credit.”

She viewed him with amused admiration.

He gradually exhaled. “But no, I have not had contact with Gunther in fifteen years,” he said. “No information. The rumors are he is living somewhere off the grid on Ibiza. I need to search him out.”

“Fifteen years? A tad long to wait to contact someone so important to you, no?”

John smiled. “A question that I have asked myself many times,” he said, shaking his head wistfully. He scanned the sea, spotting a lone white sailboat venturing valiantly across the endless blue.

“Well? What happened?”

“You are curious, aren’t you?”

“We’ve established that.”

The sail billowed in the wind.

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“Such charmingly altruistic plans to improve the world we once had, while best friends and fellow theology and philosophy majors at university long ago. He was brilliant. We planned on publishing a journal of ideas and dedicating our lives toward this project and its fruits.”

“Sounds beautiful, John. Like a dream.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Well, what happened?”

John laughed deprecatingly. “I flushed our beautiful dream down the toilet.”

Her dark lenses focused on him. “And Gunther?”

His molars ground smoothly together. Might as well divulge.

“I’m not proud to admit, but my lovely, high-earning self with my new high finance job left our plans out to dry. Abandoned our collaboration. Abandoned Gunther...lied to him.” He paused for a moment, collecting himself. “No clue what happened to him the last fifteen years. No clue at all. And things have not been quite the same ever since.”

“How so?”

“Let’s just say my life has been on a downhill journey since that time.”

“Fifteen is a lot of years to be descending.”

“I could not agree more,” John said. “I discovered hell occupies one of the upper floors.”

Angela stroked her tanned chin. “Maybe your Gunther ended up doing superbly. Having a grand life. Have you considered that?”

“Well, if not, it’s all my fault. Perhaps I incinerated his bright future, as well as mine.”

“You’re a bit harsh.”

“Nonsense. Everything is entirely my fault, and I have no inkling if he is even okay.”

Angela, squinting, observed him silently.

“Unfortunately, I’ve discovered that not knowing is the most torturous of all human conditions. The gnawing guilt.” Sweat beads emerged on his forearms. “To find him and to finally—”

She forcefully clapped, startling several lingering gulls.

“Ibiza, though not that large, is difficult to navigate,” she said in an enlivened, business-like tone. “Ninety-nine percent of tourists only visit the two major cities: Ibiza Town or San Antonio. They experience nothing but their tall hotels and crowded beaches.” She suddenly searched about in a circum-spect manner, although not a person was in sight. Her voice lowered to a whisper. “But much, much more exists on this island. More than they will ever know.”

“More?”

She squinted, gazing inland. “Out there.”

Emerald patches dotted craggy hills in the distance.

“Out there is where it all begins.” She waved her hand across the landscape. “Out there are isolated rural areas, where the most bizarre of cults are practiced. Villas tucked into the hills where unadulterated decadence is the norm. Hippie communes with their free-loving lifestyles hidden away in the mysterious North. And, beyond all that, even something...deeper.”

This “deeper,” although disturbing in its ambiguous sense, especially intrigued John.

“Odd. I’ve read a few books about Ibiza. Haven’t read anything about all this.”

“And why would you?” she demanded. Her hands now quivered. “Tourists never discover these places, so to the outside world, they don’t even exist. Don’t you see? Not a single mention of them, even in all your books. This, John, is the legendary secret Ibiza.” She peered cautiously around

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the empty landscape once again, her eyes ricocheting in their sockets.

It dawned on him that perhaps she did not have a complete grasp on her sanity.

“To explore these worlds, you need a car and connections; it’s impossible to penetrate otherwise. And you need plenty of time. Your cherished Gunther can be embedded anywhere in those secret areas.”

“Sounds insurmountable.”

He looked back out to sea, squinting in the bright light.

They had turned onto the Carrer de Sant Jaume, the main avenue in Santa Eulària’s center. A stone piazza lined with stumpy palms formed this center, and a few drowsy cafes with deserted tables dotted its sides.

“But if I’m to help find him, you must reveal to me exactly what transpired to cause this rupture. All the details.”

“Help me? Why on earth would you help me?”

She snatched his wrist. Her grip was unexpectedly robust as the tips of her nails burrowed into his flesh.

“I see the sadness in your beautiful eyes, John. And I remember being new and helpless on Ibiza years ago. Terrifying.”

He tactfully removed his wrist from her vise.

“Almost all visitors fly home,” she continued, “naive as ever, proceeding with their pathetically dull lives, without ever discovering the secret Ibiza.”

“The ‘secret Ibiza?’”

“Yes.”

“And you found this?”

“Now I can help you discover it.”

“I’m here to find Gunther, not this ‘secret Ibiza,’ as you say.”

Light flashed off her glasses. “Aren’t they the same thing?”

A tall man in white roller skates zipped by, heading toward the beach. The air smelled of wild strawberries. Atop his head sat a medieval magician's hat. His naked and rhythmically wriggling buttocks streaked toward the sunlight, as astoundingly, he wore absolutely nothing but a pair of headphones attached to a Walkman in hand. Angela did not appear the least bit fazed.

"Did you just see that?"

"What?"

"What?" John asked in exasperation. "What do you mean 'what?' That guy with the Merlin hat."

"So he has a hat."

"Forget the ridiculous hat. He's roller-skating down the street completely naked."

Angela shrugged dismissively.

Time would be needed to digest all of this, for he certainly could not grasp it at the moment. His mind, seasoned at analyzing enormous amounts of data, began to recognize factors abounding here that he could not quite identify.

"Angela, I should be going now."

She wielded a sleek black fountain pen and seized his right forearm. He observed in wonder as she scribed her phone number across it, complete with a forceful period that drew a drop of blood.

He whipped his arm free.

A slender crimson streak slithered down his skin. He assembled a few choice words, on the verge of reprimanding her, but curiously, she looked away nonchalantly, not seeming to notice. Or perhaps care.

"Call me."

"Call you? And what if I misplace your number?"

"Unlikely."

"Dismemberment is a growing problem."

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She laughed, sunglasses rattling on the bridge of her nose. “A very good friend of mine will be holding a marvelous villa party next week. An Ibiza-style party. Far different than anything you have ever experienced.”

“Are you so sure what I’ve experienced?” he shot back. His retort was entirely impulsive, as he was increasingly aware—with a mixture of dread and fascination—that she was most probably correct.

She unveiled a pitying smile, as if he were but a child claiming knowledge. “It’s a private party with, how shall I phrase this delicately for your green ears...*all types* in attendance.”

“All types?” John asked. “Now what exactly do you mean by that?”

“I can sneak you in as my personal guest, and start to make introductions.”

“Thank you, but—”

“Very few outsiders get an opportunity like this, John. The stars, I can see, are finally aligning on your side. Roll with it.”

The blood had caked into a serpent’s form on his freshly tattooed arm.

“Thank you, Angela. Nice meeting you. Do take care.”

“Call me,” she repeated, admonishing him with a startlingly long index finger. “Do not be too hesitant. Hesitancy is a fatal trait that can cause the cream of life to seep away. Learn to seize your opportunities with zeal.”

She turned and strode away.

Quite the curious first encounter on Ibiza, to say the least. But what on earth had he gotten himself into by venturing here?

And as for this Angela, she sensed hesitancy in his character? Well, he would have to consider that. For heaven’s sake, at this desolate point in life he was open to considering anything.

Her figure, standing perfectly upright as if a book rested atop her head, shimmered and shrank in the rising heat as she drifted past squat white buildings lining the avenue. She faded away in a hazy mirage.

Her eyes...he had never seen her eyes.