

LONDON

TEXT

ANTOINE ZUCCHET

Paris-based but London-bred, Antoine Zucchet worked in Fashion before moving on to writing. Enamored with the city and its streets, he builds his characters in interaction with their environment. He's adding the finishing touches to his first novel, *Flex*.

Installé à Paris, mais façonné par ses années à Londres, Antoine Zucchet travaille d'abord dans la mode avant de se consacrer à l'écriture. Il aime la ville, ses rues, et construit ses personnages en interaction avec leur environnement. Il termine actuellement son premier roman, Flex.

NOVEL
"LONDON 23"

TEXT BY ANTOINE ZUCCHET • ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSEPH DELHOMME

A

month in London is 4 weeks split in two, not so equal, halves. A lot can happen in a month. It does: Inch by inch, grass grows. Day by day, avocados ripen. Pounds to pennies, milk fills for yogurt. In London, rent is expressed weekly yet you pay the whole, by law and human standards, at the end of the month. So, before the 12th, all is well. My 240/week double room with en suite bathroom (really a shower with no sliding doors but that doesn't advertise quite as well as Italian shower) in Shoreditch (really Clerkenwell but that doesn't speak much volume outside of the post-code) seems rather affordable and convenient. If I don't multiply the weekly amount by the number of weeks I want to live here and not outside, I could stay here forever.

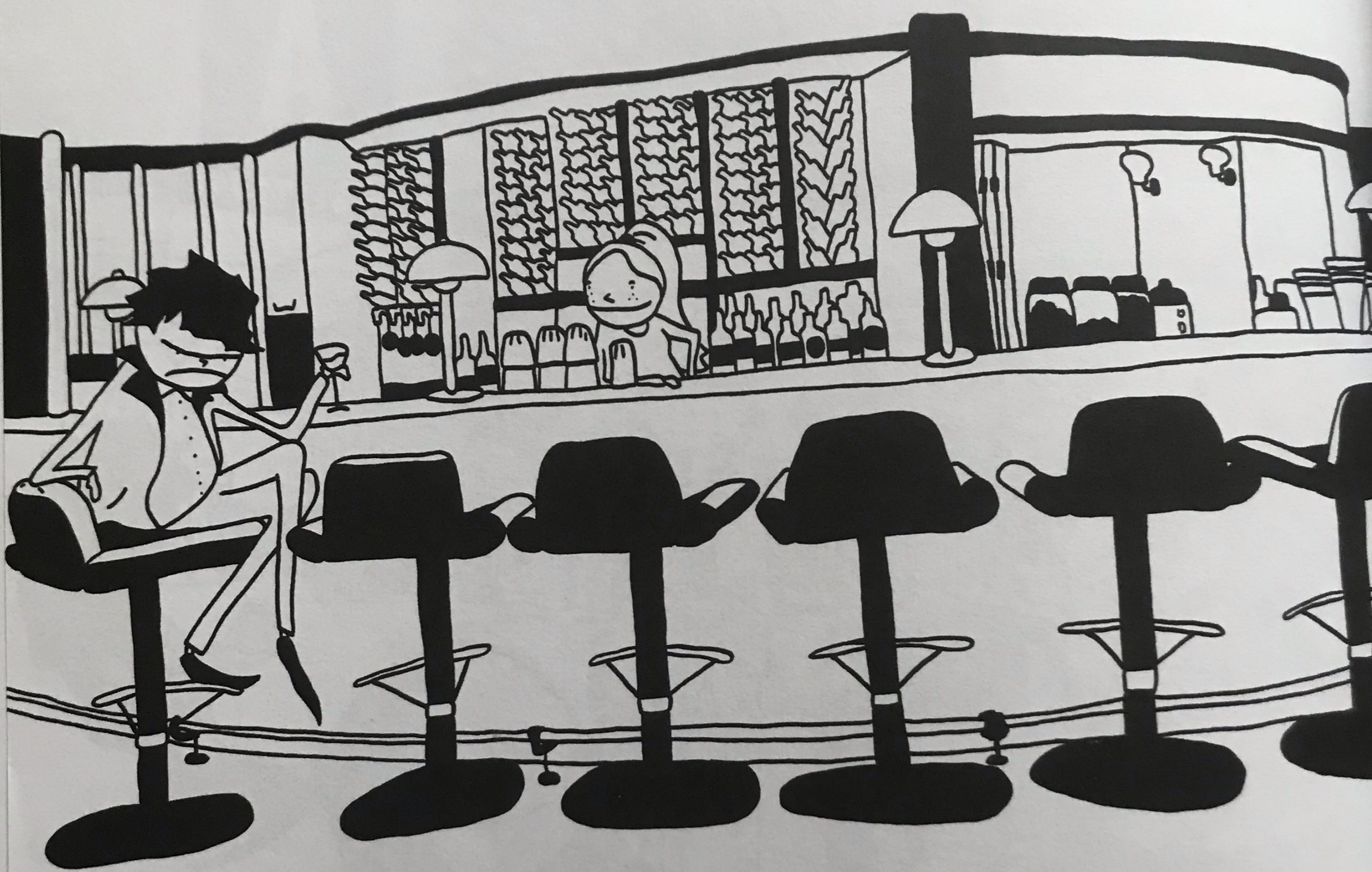
Clerkenwell is very sought after. Couples of two, families of three favor the area for the calm, the private schools, the St John Church. My kind loves it for the C in the post code, the handy commute, the private bathroom. It is truly affordable: the Clench, a gastro pub down Jerusalem Passage, offers a longhorn Beef & Bone Marrow burger for a mere 24 pounds. That fixed price is an opening offer. In a blink, in a deep growl, the fat-filled delight rises up to 26.50 with fries. It can even surge to a whooping 28 would you add melted Swiss Emmental over your fries. Between the 10th and 14th and if jeans with elastane but without buttons were in the norm, I would eat that everyday. It's an edible catharsis. But the true value of my room is not the en suite bathroom.

It lays outside. In London, location is key. My building, on the dour but immaculate white and ocher Britton Street, faces an interior design cathedral: The Zetter Hotel. My room, instead, directly faces another room rented by another guy who only owns 3 jeans and 1 dress but a boat load of Fashion magazines and tupperware utensils. A Victorian Townhouse that predates Oligarchs and deregulation, the Hotel is lauded for the penthouse, its circular terrace and the 360 view over the city.

Here, coziness only found in books with pages, red cedar tables with chandeliers and quilts over knees are everywhere. Guests vaunt the detailed embroideries on every cushions and the number of cushions per room. Here comes the convenience. Once I vented enough about the health hazard of sunflower seeds or when I mourn the long gone era of political pamphlets and activism, I go there. Not to sleep of course. I sleep across the street. Depending on the hour and the budget/date ratio, I either indulge on Flat White or Sauvignon Blanc. If it's before the 12th, Sauvignon it is. I turn a drink into plural. If it's later in the month, especially around the 25th, I crave a Flat White but settle for memories of it. The marsala tufted couches, the daring Macassar velvet covering the walls are amongst Instagram favorites. They alone are well worth the 2 minutes walk.

Today, sun beams but doesn't burn. It's May, Europe is well into spring, yet it heavily rained all morning. Rays reflect over the macadam that rarely dries but the silver and onyx glow makes up for it. Though the wine is fair, I'm really waiting for the Finnish waitress, Yerg, to end her shift.

We met 2 years prior, in that setting. Though she reminded me, every two cigarettes, they stopped serving Flat White at 2pm, we eventually got friendly then casual. The remark was both a hint at my choice of coffee and enraging because I like it a lot. We reverted back to friendly quick. Solitude is integral to London, part of the charm and the deal. The blue doors, the pale skin tone, the scent of soaked asphalt fuel frail romances. They also inspired the best songs about it. Colors are absolute. Their absence is plain. London cares little for shades and excuses. It is it or it is not. Compromise, almost vanish quicker than cereal bars offering 400 brands as a business angle. Yerg had come from Helsinki to study pattern making at the London College of Fashion. To pay for the astonishingly high tuition fees, to afford rent and a 4.25 pounds Flat White in Soho she had resorted, like many students, to waiting tables 6 days a week. Between classes, after hours, before anything resembling fun or love. ▶





Andi is unimpressed, suspects fraud. With weary eyes, he looks at me dead in the pupil. He ponders and I can already hear, sigh by sigh, YERG distances herself. 'Yes, we came together but please do not judge us as a set. I did meet the owner, he only has avocados at home you know'. He lifts the rope nonetheless but not before warning YERG that, although entrance is usually free for girls, tonight is different. There is a 'twentypoundscashonly' cover charge for girls on Tuesdays, better known throughout Soho as 'Gstards night', a savant pun on Gstaad and retards. Nice twist as it wasn't in the Yelp reviews. Andi explains the themed-night sup-

ports equality, same sex marriage and is against binary gender discrimination. He puts the emphasis on binary, hoping it filters the crowd in an instant if he says it loud enough. It doesn't but He likes the music of his own voice. YERG rolls her eyes but only in thoughts, barely refraining to pout as she asks for both the nearest ATM and my debit card. Andi

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rolls his eyes too but only to my face and points away, somewhere north. Still appalled, she pretends to see where the finger goes as I tell the memory of her to go since she already did. Inside, after the spiral staircase, the wooden tables are here, the chairs are filled. Pictures of Al Capone and the Kray Brothers cast a shadow of soft danger and naughtiness. Boys, girls and non aligned rejoice as live musicians play over whatever the DJ does. With a few tweaks of his own, he switches between Italian tarantella you play at weddings and Top 40 you never play anywhere. 30 minutes in, people have fun by the drums and spark drama by the gram. My spritz is almost spent and still no sign or missed calls from YERG. 15 minutes later, I perceive what looms: Yerg is not coming back. I should have known instead of hoped. With only pence left, and as I leave Lou nodding to Andi and everyone I can catch the eye of, I worry. About rent, about bus fare to go home, about how banal betrayal is. However, as I pass the King's Road and its many boutiques for the few, I remember London is paradise with a toll booth you pay to be humbled. ■



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Her accent is cute, the grammar funny. But today, Yerg's face is stern, these round cheeks swollen by sleeplessness.

The atmosphere is filled with lead and ashes. Today, She's full of fears about rent and worries about her future.

Yet beneath the looks of concern, I sense she's even more more appalled.

She lives in Chalk Farm, North London. She rents a flat above a Turkish Kebab shop.

In truth, she rents a single room to Greta, a 63, Austria-born seamstress who has been living here since John Major was Prime Minister.

Greta and her husband bought 2 contiguous flats back in 89, broke down the walls and turned it into a communal space to host visiting relatives.

With her children grown and gone and because council tax, they had kept the vibe alive, in exchange for money.

Most tenants are students; all of them are foreigners.

Last night, one or many broke in and stole Greta's valuables. Yerg doesn't have any.

It didn't amount to millions, though sentiments matter, but it is the graffiti in the corridor that truly worries Yerg and angered Greta.

It read, mafia style and desperately generic, '*next, we torch*'.

London has mutated over the years but had drastically so in recent months. More bones crack, few eyes click.

'Dropping acid' took on a different meaning.

Greta, traumatized and rightfully scared, refrained tears, shrieks and to point fingers but wondered aloud if her Babel nest wasn't the reason why.

Yerg had crossed her look this morning and the omen weren't good. I sympathize with her situation.

Or perhaps the Sauvignon kicks in.

She bleats and rambles about the 'racist cunts' while she downs what's left of my glass but she keeps her chin high, her nose up.

Though I have paid neither rent nor the Sauvignon yet, I suggest dinner. She demurs.

She knows London and London men; how free food is to men what silicon is to strippers: lure, deceit, tricks.

Yet, she nimbly counter-offers by asking what I think of the Sauvignon and how it compares to French wine.

The white has now definitely kicked in and I've just been approved for a credit card, with a 100 pounds overdraft no less.

The night is young, my fridge is bare, life is good. I pay the bill. It takes us 5 long minutes to agree on where to go next. As a basic search filter, I want out from nice but dull Clerkenwell and she wants something with Agave in it.

YERG suggests this new place on Greek Street, Lou.

I feign to know it and shrug it 'not all that' 'hip without the hype' and 'Gimmicky.

But she smiles with her lips spread and apparently knows both bouncers and bartenders, so she wins.

She say it's an old Italian bar, a la Brooklyn, full of mob paraphernalia.

Clandestine and a raved-review speakeasy, the walls are said to be covered with pictures of mobsters and celebrities posing with mobsters. It's Tuesday, the stakes are not that high. I can tone down the male pride I hear roaring inside and below.

Within a minute, we find a black cab, legions at this hour and back to full strength since Uber has been outlawed.

I don't know much about street signs and London's inner geography but, the shortest itinerary to central London from almost central London seems to be the center.

Not by the Thames banks and the flicking neons reflecting over it.

Yerg doesn't mind the detour but, calculating price and kilometers, I care and I count.

I silently rant at the rate and the ticking clock, but the Tate Modern shining purple fuel my dreams of grandeur, of riches obtained by culturally relevant means.

25 minutes later, the driver brakes like his son is watching and I'm being pulled out from my haze and book tour.

We soon face a herd of flannel shirts and cuban heeled boots, Gucci this, Prada that.

In pairs, people converse, use big words in long phrases with the hope to come up with one worthy of blogs or twitter.

They use hands gestures when they don't hit.

The soot-colored brick building and the small arched red door fit the descriptions from Yelp's reviewers. YERG looks past shoulders and *Dapper Dan* haircuts, checking whether her bouncer friend is here tonight.

He's not.

Note the singular.

No matter, she reassures, She saw the owner twice.

After 15 minutes of hearing snarky comments about the people he turned down, the bouncer trades places with the promoter after dapping him. Andi, stylized with an i, sports a topper and a green velvet jacket with leather lapels. The whole is sublimed by white Adidas without laces. He looks at the crowd then winces. He holds the burgundy rope in one hand and the guest list in the other. I'm both back in the early 90's and to when Fashion meant something. Yerg worries and grinds her teeth.

At last, it's our turn, our time. Sphinx like, he asks for references, She gives out a name better spelled in another alphabet and I refrain to exhale. Andi is unimpressed, suspects fraud. With weary eyes, he looks at me dead in the pupil. He ponders and I can already hear, sigh by sigh, YERG distances herself. 'Yes, we came together but please do not judge us as a set. I did meet the owner, he only has avocados at home you know'. He lifts the rope nonetheless but not before warning YERG that, although entrance is usually free for girls, tonight is different. There is a 'twentypoundscashonly' cover charge for girls on Tuesdays, better known throughout Soho as 'Gstards night', a savant pun on Gstaad and retards.

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