

PANOS SAKELIS

HELLO, I AM ALIVE!

Translation by
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NOVEL

CHAPTER 1: A WALK IN THE THAMES

James McCormick was late waking up that spring Saturday morning. He had been up all night surfing various websites and hadn't realized where the time had gone. The truth is, he had been retired for a few years now and didn't have much better to do. Since the dawn of his existence, he had lived on Clements Close in East Barnett, in north London. To be exact, that's where his childhood home was. His father had come from Scotland during the war, had met his mother in a shelter during one of the German bombings and, ever since almost, he had stayed with her in her house. A little while later they had married and had one child, James. The house hadn't suffered any damage during the bombings, and so it was easy to preserve the old colors of the neighborhood housing. It was a two floors house with an attic with a skylight, so typical of old buildings in that neighborhood.

James worked in the civil service, in one of the supportive agencies of the Foreign Secretary. He didn't have friends and every afternoon when he got off work he would sit in a pub near the train station for his house, have a beer and then go home. James lived with his mother. His father had died when he had been still young, leaving him as the heir to the home expenses and of course, the personal costs of his mother, included in which were her medical bills, all of which were not a negligible amount.

He never gets married, and almost everyone who knew him said his behavior was very odd indeed. As for his love life, that remained unknown to all. His mother had stopped talking to him about marriage many years ago. On the rare occasion, she made the mistake of mentioning it, and he would look at her austerely in the eyes in an indication that it was not a subject he wanted to talk about, and would then open the television and devote himself to one of the documentaries he liked to watch.

When he reached the age of fifty, he lost his mother and was left entirely alone. Even this new form of loneliness had not made him

change his mind – it was too late to start a family and too late for him to change his ways. He remained distant and awkward in all modes of communication.

This reclusive man liked to walk, to walk alone; the kind of walks that allow one to see people but prevent one from exchanging a single word with any of them. He especially liked to walk on the banks of the river Thames, and every Saturday morning he would take the tube from Woodside Park, which was near his house, and get off in central London so he could walk by the water. He kept this schedule with reverence, even now that he was retired. He also went down to Covent Garden for coffee, every Tuesday. On these outings, he would buy books, which he later read at home when he didn't want to watch television. He was still a fan of old movies and had in his possession quite a collection of DVDs.

There was also one more outing he made, to a bar, that none of his acquaintances knew about, but that his mother could scent on his clothes when he came home from it late at night. This outing used to be a weekly affair, but after a certain age, it had become less frequent, though always on a Wednesday.

The only time he would abandon his schedule was for twenty days each summer, when he traveled to various destinations, initially in Europe and then in the American continent. There he would just get lost, without leaving a trace. As to where he went and what he did there, he didn't discuss any of that, not even with his mother.

Because of his professional background, he was reasonably literate in computers and so when he retired he bought a desktop computer and all the other things necessary to get online. He had placed it on his desk, in that odd space between the living room and bedroom, in a nook the apartment wall made, suitable only for something like this. It was well equipped, with a smart telephone to match, and he started surfing the deep waters of the worldwide web. He opened a Facebook account and became a member of various old movie fan groups. He didn't have too many 'cyber' friends, and none of them lived in London. He didn't want one of those friendships to put him in the awkward position of an encounter – something that would make him feel like a fish out of water – and he considered those people to be mostly strangers.

James was going on 73 already. Tall, thin, pale, with lots of white

hair he had let grow out a bit, with a piercing gaze but no other redeeming features, he looked like a somewhat anemic Scandinavian than an Englishman. His sense of style after retirement had changed. All his life he had bought and was wearing classic pieces from Marks & Spencer. Now though, on his few outings, he wore khaki trousers and woolen sweaters and a knee-length overcoat with a hood. This change of his had disconcerted a bit even him, in the beginning, but it seems like it was the only revolution he would ever have.

Financially he had no problems. Conservative all these years, he had saved up so much he probably wouldn't manage to spend it all. He had never changed the furniture in his house, and only every five years he would give the home an exterior coat of paint. And that merely while his mother was still alive. Whatever broke was hardly repaired. The technician would have to say that something is no longer fixable for James to go out and purchase a new one, and even then, they were never fancy new contraptions but purely functional devices. An old Vauxhall was parked outside his house, and he only ever started it up every once in a while to keep the engine working in case of an emergency – at least that is what he used to tell himself, not wanting to sell the old antique.

James made himself a coffee and sat at the kitchen table and lit one of those aromatic cigarettes he'd been smoking once in a while since his youth. His main cigarette brand was Players, not knowing why. He switched on the TV to BBC News and watched the latest news, though it was more a matter of routine than any real need for information. The day had its importance. It was a day for a walk along the Thames.

He put his phone and wallet into the pockets of his spring raincoat and set off. At that moment a familiar sound came from his computer. Someone had left him a Facebook message. His first thought was to ignore it, but in the end, he couldn't help himself. He sat at his desk and read the letter: 'I found a copy of the movie *The Man at Eiffel Tower* with Charles Laughton. It's from 1950. If you're interested, I can make a copy and send it to you. Vivi Filibert.'

James smiled. Right away he started writing his reply: 'That would be lovely. My address is Clements Close. Talk to you this evening. I'm off for a walk along the Thames.'

He sent the message, left the computer open as usual and left the

house. He never took keys with him. Since his mother had died, he kept a key under the doormat and used that to get in and out of the house. His street was a cul-de-sac, and the only foot traffic came from his neighbors, so he didn't find any reason to worry. He walked towards the train station, walked over the bridge that crossed the train tracks and found himself on the train platform. Scott was working the ticket office. James smiled and gave him a five-pound note. Scott gave him a ticket and wished him a good day. In turn, James bid him farewell with a nod of his head and headed towards the train platform.

In less than five minutes the train had arrived, and James got on, sat by the window and half closed his eyes as if trying to draw strength from the process of isolation. He couldn't even remember how many times he had been on the same trip, from his house to Bank Station and back again. That's where his office was and where he went every day until he retired. Soon before his departure, the service had changed location. It was as if they knew how difficult he was and waited for him to leave before moving. This old habit was the reason he would always get off at that specific station, walk the rest of the way to the bank of the river, and then along it for about an hour, and finally ending up at the North Bank Restaurant for lunch, located directly north of the Millennium Bridge. The train ride lasted twenty minutes, and there were thirteen in-between stops. James smiled at the memories that in reality made up his life's repetitive motif.

One stop before Bank Station he left his seat and stood at the train doors. Doing that was an old habit hard to break. He was the first passenger getting off the train and with slow steps made his way towards the exit. He went up the stairs and headed in the direction of the Thames, leaving the Bank of England behind him. It was already noon, and he would barely have time for his usual walk if he wanted to be at the restaurant at precisely one o'clock for lunch. So he started walking parallel to the river in such a way so that he wouldn't be late for his meal. He liked to practice this little exercise on quite a few occasions, trying to pace his footsteps to achieve a specific time goal. In fact, it might have been the only game he'd played his entire life.

As the clock struck one, he entered the restaurant. He walked past the reception desk and the bar, and into the central seating area. The maître approached him and said:

“Good day mister McCormick. It is a fine one today. Shall you be sitting inside or out? Though my advice would be not to risk it just yet.”

“Good day, Tom. Inside probably; I feel the damp would affect me.” He replied.

The maître showed him the way to a table by the window out looking the Themes and politely pulled out a chair. James placed his wallet, cigarettes and cell phone on the table, took off his coat, and draped it on the chair next to his.

“What shall you be having Mister McCormick?” asked the maître as soon as James took his seat.

“The usual, Tom. And please, have them send over a black beer until its ready” he replied expressionlessly as he made himself comfortable.

He glanced at his phone. A notification informed him of a new application that allowed users to transmit their location to various social media websites, as long as said locations were registered with the service. Without thinking, he tapped to install it. A second later he forgot about the app and his phone, while a young waiter arrived with his beer. The app had installed itself not only on his phone but also on his home computer and every social media platform he was a registered on, instantly posting on his behalf: 'James McCormick is at North Bank Restaurant.'

He lit a cigarette and started on his beer, enjoying it sip by sip. He looked out of the window, and all that came to his mind were images from the many Saturdays he'd spent going to that restaurant. He remembered that it had closed only once for a short period due to renovations. Even then, however, he would come, peer at the closed door and leave for his second option. He smiled at this odd recollection.

Oh, God! He thought. Have I managed to let my obsessions turn me into a weird old man that no one likes?

The server interrupted James' thoughts by coughing slightly to make his presence known, then placed a small plate of butter on the table, another with dressing and a small basket of bread wrapped in a napkin. He smiled at James as he updated him on his meal's progress: “I'll be bringing you your salad, and in five minutes your scallops will be ready. Bonne appetite.”

James smiled and folded a napkin over his lap. He then felt a pain in his chest.

What the hell is that? Hope it's nothing serious! He thought and tried to take a deep breath. The pain seemed to overgrow and spread to his whole chest and up his arms and into his jaw. It was unbearable. He started to sweat, losing color and feeling ready to vomit. He couldn't move his body at all. A wave of anxiety and fear verging on sheer terror washed over him. *That's enough!* He thought, trying to get up and immediately falling to the floor.

The maître caught sight of him from the corner of his eye and rushed towards him shouting, "Call a doctor! Someone call an ambulance!"

A young man from a nearby table sprung to James' side proclaiming that he was a trained doctor. "He probably has a heart attack, we must get him to the hospital right away," he said as he turned James over onto his back, who was clutching his chest in pain. The maître helped him down to the floor and asked for two pillows to be brought from the bar.

The ambulance arrived soon after. Just at the last minute, as the paramedics were taking James away, the maître managed to place James' jacket on the stretcher, making sure the wallet and phone were in the pockets. He had forgotten the cigarettes on the table. The ambulance rushed off to the hospital, the pain in James' chest subsiding then returning in a second wave that wiped him out completely. His condition was serious. One of the paramedics started to look through the coat pockets in search of medication that might explain the heart troubles. He found nothing.

The closest hospital was Saint Thomas, just a few minutes away. He was sent straight to the ER for heart failure. A nurse took his personal belongings and put them in a bag, which she placed on a shelf in a storage closet at the far end of the room.

James' phone, obeying the rules of technology, sent out a notification about his new location: 'James McCormick is at Saint Thomas Hospital.'

Vivi finished her lunch with no rush, which every Saturday was accompanied by two glasses of red wine, and stood by her living room window overlooking the Atlantic Ocean that expanded in front of her for as far as the eye could see. Somewhere in the distance lay England. The house was on the north side of Le Havre, in Saint-Adresse. It had the vantage point of being on Boulevard Foch, and nothing blocked the view of the

sea. It was one of the smaller houses on the avenue, a two-floors of course, with two bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs, a living room, dining room and kitchen downstairs. Attached to one side of the house next to the kitchen was the garage. It was a sizeable one, doubling as a storage space, with a door connecting to the inside of the house – a necessary feature, as the wind would often bring in salty water by way of the sea breeze. These days her car, a well-preserved white Citroën, was kept outside the garage entrance.

She looked at her wristwatch and after realizing the time walked up the stairs to her room. She was accustomed to a short nap after lunch. She lived alone in the house. Her only son, Françoise, was traveling the world on a medium-sized oil tanker serving as Chief Mate. Vivi had made many attempts to discourage him from starting such a brutal occupation, but he wouldn't hear any of it. She had lost her husband in a shipwreck. He had been a captain in the merchant navy and died when their son was only ten years old, and it had cost her a lot. She never remarried. The compensation she got from the naval company back when the accident had happened, combined with her husband's life insurance money, was enough for a good living. Moreover, she was from a well-off family and so, never having needed to work, she devoted herself to raising her son.

Her point of contention, of course, was his job, and after having already lost a husband to the sea, she hoped the odds would not lean in her favor of it happening again. Despite his mother's indications, he followed in his father's trail and committed to the sea. At the age of forty, he was not married yet. The sea had won him over.

"Pourquoi, my boy? So many jobs under the sun!" she would tell him time and time again.

"Oh ma mère, I've wanted to be seamen ever since I can remember so, please quit with your pestering. I was born in Havre, not some mountain. Even if I weren't a seaman's son, I'd still want to be a seaman myself."

"Yes, but look what happened to your father! I can't go through that again."

"Nowadays it's more dangerous to be on the road in a car than it is to be in some boating accident. So stop your whining."

"Yes but..."

"No 'but's.' And because I know what you're getting at, no, I don't

want a family. But... If I ever do decide I want one, I'll quit the navy. OK?"

Vivi never agreed, but after a while, she did stop mentioning any of it to him. She hoped maybe he would meet a girl and decide to take the big leap. To her, he was still that angry kid who in his way was showing her he wasn't scared of life after his father's death.

Once a year, for two, three months he would return to Havre and would stay at home with her, though he did also spend a considerable amount of time in Paris where he would, as he put it, entertain himself to pass the time on dry land. He always returned to his mother laden with gifts from the many foreign nations he traveled to, even though they were usually somewhat kitsch. His next visit would be in half a year and, as far as he said, he would be staying on an extra few months. Vivi made her assumptions at first, but he reassured her that he was extending his stay because he needed to attend a training course for three months and sit the exam to graduate to First Captain.

With the years, Vivi had gained a few extra pounds, and her once-sexual figure had a few more curves than she would have liked. Her skin had retained its porcelain paleness ever since she could remember herself and, to complete the image she wanted to project, she had her hair dyed red. Redhead Vivi had reached the age of sixty-five via a relatively calm life – at least that had been the case after her husband's death. Any relationships she'd had after that didn't fulfill her and after a point, she had decided not to seek out anyone at all. She was a member of the Havre Bridge Club, and she took mass every Sunday at the local cathedral.

In one of the corners of her living room was a computer that was always on with which she frequently communicated with her son via Skype. Slowly though, she entered the world of social media and was soon a member of a group for people who like old movies, her second favorite hobby after playing Bridge. Most of the group members were at her age or older. One of those members was James McCormick, an Englishman, with whom she traded a couple more words than the rest. Nothing special, since her 'cyber' friend seemed to keep a distance from all modes of communication.

I must remember to tell him again about that movie, she thought and lay down. It didn't take her very long to fall asleep.

She woke up rather late that afternoon. It was already six o'clock. Every Saturday evening she would do her hair for next day's Sunday mass.