

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 awk-

ward 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 Thames 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. She showered and washed her hair and, after drying it, put on her robe and went down to the living room to read the new book she had bought. She would do her nails before going to bed. That way, she believed, they ran no risk of getting damaged from any housework. As she walked past the computer, she remembered James. She sat at the desk and logged on to Facebook. She was puzzled by his posts announcing his arrival at a restaurant and then at a hospital.

"What was he doing there? One of his relatives must be there for some reason, and he's visiting. He obviously forgot our rendezvous," she said out loud and after closing the monitor went back to the armchair in front of the TV. She switched it on mindlessly and surfed the channels but found nothing of interest, so she left it on a channel that would be showing a documentary in an hour and opened her book.

Late that night, when she decided to go to sleep, she rechecked her computer. No message from James. His last post remained the same. One option was to be still at the hospital. The other was to have his phone switched off. She tried to remember if he had mentioned anything about his health, but nothing came to mind.

He's visiting the hospital, she thought, sure of what must be happening and headed up the stairs to her room.

She sat at her computer again on Monday afternoon. No news. Lots of posts by other members of the group, but nothing from James. She sent him a couple of messages, but she got no reply. *He must be schmoozing!* She thought and smiled.

By Wednesday morning she started to worry about her friend's silence on social media. She didn't know him personally, but he had a kind disposition, at least that's how it seemed from his profile picture, which had intrigued her. She rung up one of her son's friends – a distant relative who used to call her 'aunty' when he was younger, who also happened to own a computer store – and asked him to look up more information on James McCormick. She gave him her passwords and told him roughly what had happened. An hour later he called her back and gave her James' phone number, which he said was already registered on his profile. She thanked him, hung up and rang the telephone number he had given her, thinking that it was the right thing to do. She started to panic about what she was doing. *What will I say?* She thought and was about to hang up the phone. After all, it had been ringing for a while with no one picking up the other end. No reply at all. She kept her courage and let it ring. Her worry had now peaked.

“Something’s happened to him,” she said out loud.

She went to her computer and typed in the name of the hospital and found it was a big hospital in London. She wrote down the address and phone numbers on a piece of paper. She was soon on the phone with the information desk.

“I would like to inquire about Mister James McCormick please,” she asked politely with a strong French accent.

“What is this regarding exactly?” replied the woman on the other end of the line, also politely.

“Yes mademoiselle, I would like to know if anyone has been admitted by the name I just gave you. James McCormick. He’s not answering his cell phone and the last I heard, he was at your hospital.”

“I see. Are you a relative?” asked the woman.

“No, I’m a friend. I’m calling from Havre.”

“I’m sorry ma’am, but I’m not authorized to give you such information. You will have to try calling your friend's cell phone again” she responded calmly.

“Please, I understand that what I am asking is frowned upon, but I wouldn't want to call the police and worry my friend. Please, could you just tell me if there has been someone admitted by that name?”

“Alright, I’ll make an exception, but don’t ask me anything about his condition. You said, James McCormick?”

“That’s right.”

“Someone by that name has been admitted.”

“Thank you, mademoiselle, take care. Have a good day.”

“Good day to you too,” she said and hung up.

Vivi's furrowed her brow; it was the first time something like this had happened to someone she knew. She still couldn't believe an online acquaintance would draw so much of her attention, but she felt trapped and didn't know what to do. At that moment Skype started to ring on her computer, it was her son. She ran to the desk.

“There he is,” she said as soon as his image came up on the screen.

“Why are you shaken up?” he said as soon as he saw her.

Vivi told him about her friend and how she was worried. Her son listened to her in silence and waited for her to finish. He realized that she must be up to something and in need to confess, or she wouldn't have mentioned it. He was particularly fond of his mother.

“So here’s what’s going to happen. In exactly seven days I will be at

the Stanlow Refinery in Liverpool. We're going to be unloading petrol for 22 hours. Why don't I arrange for a boat to come pick you up and bring you to the ship? I've missed you. On your way here or back you can make a stop in London and see your friend. What do you say?"

Vivi was thrilled by her son's proposal. She had missed him and even though it had only been a few months since she had seen him last, even a few hours with him would give her strength until it was time for him to come home. They chatted for a while, and he got all her details so he could make all the arrangements for their meeting.

What she didn't tell him, though she hadn't yet finalized it in her mind, was that she would visit London on her way up to Liverpool. Her worrying was unjustified and perhaps even a bit excessive, but in the end, she decided to follow her impulse and look for him or any information explaining what had happened to him and why he had disappeared. Her final decision was to go to Paris and take a train from there to London.

She sat at the computer and started looking up information about her trip. She took notes on a little pad. Two hours later, as she looked at them, she could envision her journey and a new world unfolded in front of her eyes.

Late that night she rang her childhood friend Jacqueline Moureaux to fill her in. Her house was only a few hundred meters away from the beach road Vivi's house was on, and Vivi had no sooner started telling her the news when Jacqueline interrupted,

"I'm coming over."

In less than ten minutes, a tall, thin white-haired woman with dry features, was at Vivi's door. Before the doorbell had time to ring, Vivi was swinging open the door and signaling her friend to come inside. Jacqueline waltzed in, took her coat off and made herself comfortable on the living room armchair feeling right at home. Turning to Vivi, she said,

"Before you start, crack open one of those expensive Bordeaux's you keep hidden in the back of the pantry. And then come sit with me."

Vivi burst out laughing, brought a bottle from the bar and placed two glasses on the table next to the armchair.

"I'm all ears and don't you even dream of leaving anything out. How long did you say you've known this Englishman?" she questioned

Vivi who was popping the wine bottle to open.

“I didn’t say, and I don’t know” Vivi replied simply.

“And what the hell are you going to do in London?”

“I’m going to Liverpool for Francoise and passing through London,” she smiled.

“Oh la la, what madness! You’re going to go all the way to the end of nowhere just to see Francoise for ten hours? When he asked you to go with him, you wouldn’t budge. What’s this all about?”

“Nothing!” Vivi reacted.

“If this were a man, I would say that this ‘nothing’ has large balls but I’ve known you too long, and if you did have a lover I would have figured it out already. I ask you again, what is happening?”

“Jacqueline, drink your wine and stop being silly. Nothing’s happening, he’s in the hospital and you, don’t ask me anything else.”

“Lucky for you I can’t come with you. Bernard needs some general check-ups, and he’s going to be in the hospital for the next couple days.”

“What’s your husband got this time?”

“It’s all in his head; he’s got nothing. He just can’t get it up and thinks something other than old age is to blame. Anyway, I want a daily update from you and don’t even dream about making any decisions on your own because I’ll write you off as a friend and you’ll grow old with that lukewarm Bridgette woman,” she said and laughed at her joke.

The rest of the conversation trailed off from the subject of Vivi’s visit. They started to remember old stories from Francoise and Jacqueline’s daughter, now married with children, and how they never managed to get the two kids together. The bottle of wine finished, and Jacqueline headed out. It was almost midnight. She bid her friend goodnight, pulled on her jacket for it was getting chilly and walked home. Vivi turned out the lights and checked the computer one more time just in case. Nothing had changed. As far as social media and the information they traffic were concerned, James was still at the hospital.

Two days later Vivi was boarding a train to Paris. There she would switch trains and head to London that same afternoon. Jacqueline, who was giving her last minutes instructions, escorted her to the train station.

“Make sure you go to his house first. You don’t want to end up getting there and being told he’s checked out. Where is your hotel?”

“In Waterloo, I got a room at Novotel; it’s the closest one to the hospital. If James is still there, I won’t have to travel far, and if he turns out to be home, I won’t be far from downtown. Now go, you should go pick up your husband. You never told me what the results show!”

“They showed that I should have married a younger man,” Jacqueline giggled, kissing her friend and walking off.

Vivi boarded the train; she sat at a window seat and pulled the novel she was reading out from her handbag and devoted herself to it. She had done the trip Havre-Paris so many times that the scenery outside the window didn't move her, yet some things never changed – like looking at the view from a moving train on its way to Paris. Finally, she couldn't focus on her book, and not long after, she found herself gazing out of the window at the scenery that was rushing past her.

What am I doing? She wondered at some point, her heart clenching. It was one of the few times in her life she had followed an impulse.

When she arrived in London, she felt tired. She took a cab from outside the train station and was soon walking through the hotel lobby. She gave her ID to the young girl at the check-in desk and without too much chitchat followed the bellboy who led her to her room. As soon as she walked in, she put down her bags and walked to the window. The view was nothing special. When she made the booking, she had hoped that her room should be looking at the Thames. She compared this sight to the one from her house by the ocean and felt a pang of disappointment. And as if that wasn't enough, that strange feeling she had had earlier on the train hadn't gone away. And for the first time since she decided to take this trip, she was overcome by fear.

Vivi, breathe. The whole idea was all your choice; no one pressured you into any of it so now you have to see it through. She thought of her son. Their date was in five days. The second wave of fear welled up within her. What am I going to do for five days in London on my own?

She decided to go downstairs to the dining room for a light supper. It was a chance to be around people, plus it was late enough; she would rest afterward. She eventually read her book, She would visit James' house the following day. She smiled, not exactly sure of why.

She felt she needed to talk to someone, so she rang up Jacqueline.

“You told me to give you an update whenever I thought you needed an update. So here’s me updating you,” Vivi said while her voice was trembling.

“And what’s with your trembling voice? Haven’t even arrived in London and regretting it already?”

“I haven’t regretted it,” Vivi said, getting angry, not with her friend but more so at herself for giving away too much.

“Vivi, I’m sure it will all work out fine,” her friend replied. “You’ll see your son, and who said a small adventure every once in a while is a bad thing at our age? So get some rest, and I await your update tomorrow. Good night my dear.”

“Good night Jacqueline, my kisses to Bernard.”

“Now what did I ever do to you and you wish that upon me?” she replied, laughed and then hung up the phone.