

PANOS SAKELIS

HELLO!
I AM ALIVE

NOVEL

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. Truth is, he had been retired for a few years now and had little better to do. Since the dawn of his existence, he had lived on Clements Close in East Barnet, 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 had suffered no 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. He left 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, he would look at her austere in the eyes in a warning that it was not a subject he wanted to talk about. Then he opened the television and devote himself to one documentary 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

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to change his ways. He remained distant and awkward in all modes of communication.

This reclusive man liked to walk, to walk alone; the 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. 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. Even now that he's retired, he kept this schedule. 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. 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. James 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 seventy-three 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 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 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 actual 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.

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“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 at the ticket office. James smiled and gave him a five-pound note. Scott gave him a ticket and wished him a good day. 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. He was 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 toward 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 walked along the river toward Blackfriars Bridge at such a pace that his walk would be just the right one so that he would not be late for his meal. He liked to do this exercise frequently, trying to arrange his pace to achieve a certain time result. 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 maitre approached him and said:

"Good day, mister McCormick. It is a fine day 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 maitre 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. As soon as he sat down, Tom took a step and stood next to him.

"What shall you be having, Mister McCormick?" asked the maitre as soon as James took his seat.

"The usual, Tom. And please, have them send over a black beer until it's 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 black beer, enjoying it sip by

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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. James remembered it had closed only once for a short period because of 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 let my obsessions turn me into a weird old man that no one likes?

The waiter 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 is nothing serious! He thought and tried to take a deep breath. The pain seemed to overgrow and spread to his entire chest and up his arms and into his jaw. It was unbearable. He 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. *So far it was!* He thought, made to stand up and collapsed on the floor.

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

From a nearby table, a young man immediately got up and ran towards him, declaring that he was a practicing doctor. He saw James on the floor, turned him around and, seeing him holding his chest, said,

"We probably have a heart attack going on. He needs to go to the hospital immediately." He laid him on the floor and asked for a couple of pillows to be brought from the bar.

By the time these were done, the ambulance had arrived. The paramedics put him on the stretcher to take him away. At the last

moment, the maitre left on the stretcher, his jacket with his wallet and his cell phone in its pockets. His cigarettes were forgotten on the table. The ambulance immediately left for the hospital.

The pain in James's chest subsided, but a second wave knocked him unconscious. The situation was serious. One paramedic searched his pockets for some medicine, thinking that his heart problem could not be unknown to him. But all indications were that he was unaware of his condition, since they found no pills or other sign he was taking any medication for any reason.

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 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's 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 Sainte-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 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 brief nap after lunch. Vivi lived alone in the house. Her only son, Françoise, was traveling the world on a medium-sized oil tanker serving as Chief

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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. In addition, 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 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 stopped mentioning any of it to him. She hoped maybe he would meet a girl and decide to take the full 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. During that time, he did also spend a considerable amount of time in Paris, where he would 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 stay on for an extra few months. Vivi made her assumptions at first, but he reassured her 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 kept 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 anyone at all. She was a member of the Havre Bridge Club, and she took mass every Sunday at the local cathedral.

A computer was in one corner of her living room 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 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 the 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

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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 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 show 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 was 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 schmooze! She thought and smiled.

By Wednesday morning, she worries 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 rang up one of her son's friends, a distant relative who used to call her 'aunty' when he was younger, who also owned a computer store, and asked him to look up more information on James McCormick. Vivi 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 panicked 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.

Vivi went to her computer and typed the name of the hospital and found it was a big hospital in London. She wrote the address and phone numbers on a piece of paper and 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 did not understand you! You said he is not answering his cell phone and how do you have information that he may have been admitted to our hospital?"

"Yes miss, that's what I said. You, young people know that your mobile phones are now making your mark, too. Don't you have such an app at the 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 allowed to give you such information. 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 him. Please, could you just tell me if there has been admitted someone 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."

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

Vivi 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 rang 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 she must be up to something and in need to confess, or she wouldn't have mentioned it. He was 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 with 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 completed it in her mind, was that she would visit London on her way up to Liverpool. Her worrying was unjustified and perhaps even 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 in 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 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 Françoise 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 Françoise 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 had 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 of days."

"What's your husband got this time?"

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"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 Vivi, don't even dream about deciding 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 remembered old stories from Françoise and Jacqueline's daughter, now married with children, and how they never got 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 in 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 gazed

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 look at the Thames. She compared this sight to the one from her house by the ocean and felt a pang of disappointment. As if it 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. Vivi eventually read her book. She would visit James's house the following day. She smiled, not exactly sure of why, and feeling she needed to talk to someone, 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,

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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.

The next day, Vivi enjoyed her breakfast until the last bite. She had a French Press coffee, smoked a cigarette and was then ready to visit James' house. With this, Vivi tried to convince herself that everything was fine, that nothing was wrong. She was being overcome with doubt about her actions. Something was bothering her, but she preferred to relegate it to her consciousness. Vivi glanced at her watch, set out and walked to Lambeth North train station, which wasn't even a kilometer from the hotel. She was there in twelve minutes. She found her train information on the announcement board, bought a ticket and boarded the train.

About one hour later, she was walking across a bridge that separated the train station from the rest of the neighborhood and, leaving the train tracks behind her, uneasily walked towards James' house. She could feel her heart beating inside her chest.

What is this madness at my age? She thought and almost turned back. She was held back by the image of Jacqueline and Bridgette laughing at her from then until eternity.

She arrived at the house and walked up the two small steps that lead to a covered porch. She took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. Vivi put her ear to the door but heard nothing. She rang the bell again. Nothing happened. She didn't know what to do. She decided to try the doorbell a third time, and if no one opened up, she would go to the hospital. Still no reply. As she turned on her heels to go, she felt something under the front doormat she was standing on. A mental image of a key formed in her mind. She bent over and found that she was right; there was a key that looked like it belonged to the front door. She panicked.

What if he's inside and something's happened? She thought and turned the key in the lock. She glanced over her shoulder toward the other houses. No one was around. She quickly moved inside in hopes of not being seen.

"James?" she said in a soft voice, but none replied. "Mister McCormick," she repeated, this time a little louder, but still got no reply. She took her jacket off, left her handbag on the living room couch, and moved towards the staircase. "James?" she shouted up the stairs.

Complete silence. Vivi walks up the wooden staircase, on alert for any sounds, but with nothing to be heard. She opened the first door she found in front of her. She found a bedroom with classic English decoration, old wooden furniture, flowery curtains and an old rocking chair. Two woven carpets were laid out on the floor to the left and right of the bed. The bed must not have been slept in for a while, as the room smelled musty and cooped up. She closed the door and opened the next one. It was a bathroom, rather big. Inside were only male colognes and shaving equipment. She observed the dried up bar of soap, a sign that it hadn't been used in a few days.

Now Vivi was worrying. She quickly opened the third door. Right away, she could tell it was James's room. It had a similar aesthetic to the previous one, but in this room, the bed had been made in a rush, and there were books on one of the bedside tables, mainly crime fiction novels. A copy of the Bible was on the other bedside table. This time Vivi exited, shutting the door quietly, as if not wanting to disrespect her friend's personal space.

"I should call Jacqueline," she said out loud, going down the stairs. As she moved to the living room, she spotted an open computer. She sat in the wooden chair in front of it and read the messages that had shown up on the screen. They were all from her. She glanced at the kitchen, then walked to the fridge and studied the contents inside. She picked up a glass bottle of milk and checked the cap. It had expired.

He must have never come home after the restaurant, she thought, her mind coming up with many potential scenarios. The one she stuck with was that something has happened to him suddenly.

There's no way the hospital was planned. We were supposed to chat on Facebook that very evening.

She sat in an armchair and called Jacqueline.

"Speak of the devil," she said. "Where are you?"

Hello, I am Alive!

"At his house," replied Vivi without elaborating.

"Is he alright?" asked Jacqueline.

"I don't know, he's not here!" said the worried voice at the other end.

"And how did you get in? Did his wife get the door?"

"There is no wife. I found the key to the front door under the mat, so I took it and went inside myself. He hasn't been home since last Saturday. Jacqueline, I'm worried something's happened to him!"

"What for are you acting like this? It's not like you've ever seen or met the guy. Get out of there and go to the hospital. That's where you'll find out what happened. But look, take some official paperwork with you or something, don't show up like a dunce!"

"What on earth... Are you suggesting I rummage through his stuff?"

"Why not? What else are you doing right now?"

Vivi said nothing. Her friend was right; she was rummaging, and through a stranger's life at that.

"Fine. I'll see what or if I can find anything. I'll call you again from the hotel."

Her first thought was to check his computer for addresses of family and friends. She sat at the desk. *I'm going to need somewhere to write all this down*, she thought as she was already reaching for the desk's right-hand side drawer. It slid open with a little too much ease, coming right off its hinges and emptying all of its contents onto the floor. It was full of photographs.

Vivi put the drawer back in its socket and sat on the floor to collect the pictures. They were all old, dating back to his childhood and leading up to his current rough age of fifty-five, or so she had calculated, while there was also a couple from what looked like a celebration. One of them caught her attention. She flipped it over and saw a date from about eight years ago and a hand-written note: 'Retirement.'

After that, she was in a rush to leave. She didn't want to dawdle any longer and felt increasingly anxious about being in a stranger's house. She decided against staying to look through his paperwork. Instead, she would have to take a few of the pictures with her so she

could study them in peace back at the hotel. She looked around in search of a bag to put them in. She headed for the storage cupboard beneath the stairs; there was bound to be something in there. Indeed, she found a small, dusty satchel. She hastily dusted it off and threw the photographs inside.

Then she opened the left drawer of the desk, this time more carefully, so it wouldn't come flying out like the last one. Inside were many documents, from bills to government certificates. In there she found as well insurance documents and payment receipts. Without thinking, she threw those into the bag too.

I'll take them to the hospital and explain they were the only way to reach his family, she thought and momentarily felt better. She sat down at the desk again with a blank sheet of paper and a pen and looked through his computer's address book. Nothing.

"Damn you, James," she said out loud. "Where the hell do you keep your phone numbers?"

The silence that followed both inside her head and out was a suitable reply to her question. This guy was a loner. Then this was not only scared her, but it also gave her the shivers. She felt like her time was up, and she had to leave his house as soon as possible. At that moment, she realized just how invasive of his privacy her behavior had been. She zipped up the bag and got up to go. She paused, wondering if she should turn the computer off, but decided against it at the last minute. What if James had a password? Then she wouldn't be able to log back in.

How the hell does it stay logged on for so long? She thought and made a mental note to ask her nephew to have hers do the same. She had to type in usernames and passwords every time, and it was getting on her nerves.

When she was outside the house, she placed the key under the doormat again and walked towards the station. She figured she should check in with Jacqueline again. She found her at the supermarket, so they agreed to chat a bit later when they would both be in the comfort of their own home and hotel room, respectively.

Within in an hour, Vivi was back in her room. She emptied the contents of the bag onto the bed and separated it all. Pictures in one

pile, documents in another, bills in another. After she had everything separated, something that took longer than she had expected as curiously studied all the pictures, she looked through the documents. In amongst them were a health insurance booklet and a birth certificate. This paper was so yellowed and old, she had difficulty unfolding it. James had been born around this time of year. Soon it would be his birthday.

"Seven years older," she said quietly and immediately regretted it. *James' age wasn't of importance*, she thought, thinking of him as an acquaintance and not so much as a friend she was close to.

"This is nuts," she muttered. "Not only did I leave my house like some young adventuress, but I've also entered someone else's home, stuffed their personal life into a bag and now I'm studying it on my bed in the name of friendship. And, as that wasn't enough, Vivi Filibert, you're looking for an excuse not to feel sorry for it all! Now that's just unacceptable!"

She got off the bed, grabbed her cell phone and her half-empty packet of Gauloises and went downstairs to the living room. It was time to call her friend. She smiled to herself, looked around for the smoking area, spotted a table in an awful part of that area, and made her way there. She ordered a French Press coffee and lit a cigarette.

[James]... He had undeniably no sense of reality. It was all like a fragmented, imageless dream, with explosions of a thousand bursting colors the only consistent feature. And in amongst all these explosions, some words were formed by the colors, morphed more like sounds than ideograms, which melted away as soon as the silence came. And then happened the absolute nothing again. Something was trying to awaken, being born, but he just kept going for as long as possible on this journey of nothing. His efforts threw him into a black abyss.

"Doctor quick, we're losing him!" a nurse's voice was heard.

The doctor sprung in her direction and pulled the defibrillator to James's side. The nurse, meanwhile, had pulled the sheet that covered him, preparing his thin chest to receive the help he needed.

He placed the two pads on his chest and delivering two counter-shocks. The nurse looked at the cardiac monitor in relief; he was back. The doctor examined the liquids James had tubed into his body and adjusted the flow of one of them.

"Any more information on mister McCormick?" he asked the nurse.

"Someone from the secretariat said they sent the police round to his house to investigate, but found no one there. They're supposed to be looking for a relative, but you know how these things are. They will not pay much attention or prioritize it. You know how many cases like this they get every day?" she replied, not withholding her clear appetite for gossip. "What if no one is found?"

"I checked with the Patient Transporter Head, and she sent me back to the administration, who told me he's a retiree from the public sector. That means a specific medical coverage. We're checking if he has any other type of insurance, because at this rate if he doesn't, and we have to go beyond conventional treatment, they're going to ask us to pull the plug on him."

"Is that what they said?"

"No, they didn't explicitly request that, but they said there are other patients we should focus on."

"Isn't that a little harsh?"

"Harsh or otherwise, he's had his life. So I'd monitor the young fella next to him, and God knows how to handle the rest," said the doctor and the conversation ended there.

The nurse wasn't as sentimental as she presented herself to be, but this doctor was still relatively young, so she was poking him with an ethical dilemma. She covered James with a sheet and turned her attention to the young man in the bed next to him, who had cracked his head open in a car accident. His parents were coming every day for half an hour to see him. She knew that, sadly, he probably would not make it, unlike James, who seemed to have more chances of survival. In fact, in a few days, he could get transferred to a particular ward where he would remain on life support and have his heart mechanically powered. The rest of his bodily organs were still functioning quite fine.

Hello, I am Alive!

After a long while, Vivi hung up the phone. Her friend had made fun of her decision, but she wasn't about to give up now. Soon, the visiting hours at the hospital would start, and she wanted to get there a bit earlier. From the hotel reception, they had informed her that the Saint Thomas hospital was less than five hundred meters north.

She went up to her room, collected some documents and a private insurance card of James' that she thought would be useful and headed towards the hospital. Within five minutes, she was outside its main entrance. She walked up to the reception desk and asked the young man behind the counter,

"Excusez moi, where could I please find mister James McCormick?"

"Are you one of his relatives?" he asked politely after looking at the screen in front of him.

"Does it matter? In France, they don't ask us if we are a relative when we visit someone."

"No, that's not the reason, ma'am. I'm sorry; I wasn't able to explain. See, we are looking for one of Mr. McCormick's relatives. At least that is what the memo on my screen tells me."

Vivi decided it was all or nothing.

"Well, we're not related in a strict sense, and I'm afraid he has no other family. We have been living together for the last few years. My name is Vivi Filibert. I was out of town at my family home in France, in Havre. I have James' paperwork with me, and I must see the doctor to arrange the details of his recovery."

The young man looked at her carefully. He looked at Mr. McCormick's medical chart, noticed nothing had been filled out under the Insurance section, then turned to her smiling and said politely,

"Misses Filibert, he is in the ER, on the third floor, on the right wing. Take the elevator from the hall on the right. Follow the green line on the floor, and it will lead you right there. After that, you shall have to go to the secretariat."

Vivi smiled and followed the green line on the floor as she had been instructed. When she reached the ER section, she was asked to wear special protective socks over her shoes, along with a

disposable robe, mask and gloves, and that she could stay no longer than five minutes. After that, she could speak to the doctor who was on the second floor.

Vivi did as she was told and entered the ER room, moving silently towards the bed at which the nurse had pointed. She stood next to James and looked at him carefully.

So this is you, Mister McCormick! She thought and scrunched her face in keen observation. The man in front of her, pale, covered in a white sheet, looks more like someone dead than someone fighting to stay alive.

And then, spontaneously, she reached out her hand and rested his hand just below the butterflies where the serum tubes ended. He was calm, his heart rate slow. As she looked at the monitor, trying to figure out if that was a good or bad thing, the heart monitor sped up. She turned to the nurse, who seemed unphased and so thought little of it herself either.

[James]... This time the explosion had a pale blue hue and wasn't as loud as the previous one, even though the color seemed to last longer. Somewhere, in some odd cycle, a word was written; the word 'Ego.' And then absolute darkness returned, no feeling and neither a virtual image.

Vivi took a step back, then turned to exit the room. She took off the protective clothing, threw it in a big cardboard box, smiled at the nurse and headed towards the stair to visit the doctor's assistant, as the doctor himself would not be in until very late. Vivi didn't know what to say. She understood she would be asked about details unknown to her, and she didn't want to jeopardize any future visits with a wrong answer. Knowing nothing, Vivi would confess that James never spoke to her about any health problems, something that was partially true. What she didn't expect to hear was the assistant's last question.

"There is the possibility that he won't come back, misses Filibert. What would you have us do at that event? Of course, his next of kin will have to be notified, as you are not bound to him in marriage.

Hello, I am Alive!

Am I correct?"

Vivi nodded in agreement.

"I will make another attempt to look through his papers in case I come up with anything. What kind of timeline can you give me?"

"If his condition stabilizes, we'll be able to move him to a double room in a few days. After that, only God knows. Does his insurance cover the treatment?"

"To be honest, I don't know, but I have all his insurance papers with me, and I'm supposed to be going to administration after this to look for them. I assume we will make some sense of it. If needed, can he be transferred to a room on his own?"

"There is one room available, which, of course, costs more. But given that Mr. James McCormick insurance only offers the basic coverage, and this case is like most I've seen, then it's probably not eligible for an upgrade."

"I'll try to cover that extra cost for a while," she added quickly, amazed at the words that had just come out of her mouth. She thought of her husband and how she had never seen him grow old. James McCormick and Victor Filibert became one. Two completely different relationships merged into this aging face on a bed in the ER.

As fast as she could, she left the office. She felt panicked. She didn't know how she would react if she delayed her departure any longer. Vivi went down to the entrance and went out into the open space. She lit a cigarette and inhaled as much of the smoke as she could. Oddly enough, she felt her mind clearing.

"I must go back to his house and look through his papers," she muttered and then smiled. She felt stronger and pleased with herself.

Wait 'til Jacqueline finds out, I won't hear the end of it! She thought and burst into giggles.

At the secretariat, they didn't seem to care much for the legal details and welcomed her as if she were his ordinary wife. As long as she had the patient's paperwork and would cover the extra costs, everything seemed all right to them. Bureaucracy had loopholes, even in cases such as these. It didn't take long to go through everything. From there on out, they would handle contacting the

insurance company and tying up any loose ends. They kept Vivi's phone number and thanked her. She left, smiling at how quickly some cogs in the system turn.

She strolled back to her hotel. She had to deal with the photographs. Some clue would show itself. She ordered a coffee and went up to her room. Vivi opened the window to the small balcony, pulled up a chair to it, and lit a cigarette. She knew smoking wasn't allowed, but she put this minor misdemeanor down to her heritage. A French woman in London could not act like everybody else. At the thought of this, her smile widened even more.

"Just as I had cut it down, I start it up again," she said out loud after a couple of puffs and swore to herself that when all this was over, she would quit for good. The sad thing was that Jacqueline also smoked, and it was difficult on gossip afternoons when one was smoking and the other was inhaling the secondhand smoke as if it were balm. Jacqueline would always light one, hand it to Vivi and say the same thing: 'Last one for today.' But still there was one more, and one more and around the fifth one, they would stop, which was at the same time their gossiping would end. Thank goodness they didn't meet up every day.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. It was the young waiter with her coffee. She thanked him, gave him a small tip, and went back to her chair.

She looks through the pictures with curiosity. Most of them were old and showed James holding his parents by the hand. One of them showed James and his mother in front of a church. Vivi was amazed. She knew that church! It was the Chapelle Notre-Dame de la Garde, about 30 kilometers north of Havre, one of the more deserted coasts of Normandy. The church was known for its distinct rooftop that pointed upwards, splitting the sky with its cross on the top. She and Jacqueline and their friend Brigitte would often go there to pray.

She flipped the picture over, and this time she got full body shivers. On it was a date, August 22, 1950. It was the day the church was inaugurated, but it was also the date of her birthday. She knew this because her parents would often recount the time they missed the church's first ever mass because her mother was in labor on the

way to the hospital. This apparent coincidence intrigued her.

Mon Dieu, what the hell is happening? She thought and flipped all the pictures over, separating the ones with something written on the back, made a small pile of about a dozen photos, and put them aside. She would look at them more carefully another time, as right now she didn't feel up to the task. Also, all the running about from one side of London to the other had her feeling weary. She couldn't help herself, so she rang up Jacqueline.

"What now?" her friend asked with a sardonic tone.

Vivi told her about the picture coincidence.

"Listen, you don't look like Poirot to me, so I say give it up. Your boy will come in a few days, and you have to meet him, wherever he's coming to, anyway."

"I'm not pretending to be some detective. But you have to agree, that's some coincidence!"

"Exactly. And that's all it is, a coincidence. So, good night and we'll talk tomorrow. By the way, what do you plan on doing tomorrow?"

"By the way, I plan ongoing back to his house. Good night," she said ironically and hung up the phone laughing and already feeling better.

[James]... Again, just for a fraction of a second, a bright blue cloud appeared, but only this time it seemed to morph into a sharp corner, ripping the sky as it moved up toward the sky. It was like a pointed church steeple aiming at something invisible in the heavens. At the top was a... All vanished before the image revealed itself.

The ER nurse checked one screen that was standing in front of her desk. There were many there, one next to the other, each one monitoring a different patient. James's heartbeats had risen by two points and had stabilized there. The nurse recorded the time of the occurrence and made a mental note to inform the doctor.

Despite that, she left her office, separated from the ER room only by a small glass divider, and went to James. She gave him a general check-up and, satisfied with the results, went back to her office. It

was late in the evening, and she had been left alone for a while. She glanced at the monitor of the young man who had suffered the car accident and noticed something unusual. Something wasn't right. She rang the emergency bell, a sharp sound following. She rushed to his side and prepared to give him a shot. The doctor appeared. He threw his sandwich onto the desk and ran to the nurse, taking the syringe from her hand and inserting the needle into the young man's chest.

"Good call," he told her and checked the man's pulse.

Soon he was stable again. They both sat in the office, and the nurse breathed a sigh of relief. The doctor picked up the sandwich and ate it again, now and then checking the clock.

"What's up? Got another date?" she asked.

"Don't worry; I won't leave you here on your own. I've arranged for my sub to come in a bit earlier. But yes, I have a meeting."

The nurse didn't reply. She shook her head as a crooked smile crept up her lips.

"Better watch out for those interns. They're here today and gone tomorrow. You wouldn't want to get in trouble," she said, dropping many innuendos.

Vivi just couldn't get up. Something about the change of bed, something about the fact that she went to sleep late. She just kept falling asleep and waking up again. When finally left the bed, it was already eleven. The hotel restaurant was closed, and if she wanted breakfast, she'd have to pay extra. She ordered only a coffee and sat at the far end of the café and smoked a cigarette. After she was finished, she walked to the train station, and precisely one hour later, she was entering James' house for the second time with the ease of someone who knows about her way.

She was familiar with the surrounding, so without thinking twice, she walked to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. While it brewed, she took a rubbish bag from one of the kitchen drawers and filled it with fruit, yogurt, milk, and other products from the fridge that had rotted and smell.

"There's no way he's going to be needing any of this today," she

said out loud and only then realized that whatever she was doing, she was doing without thinking about how bad it looked. She stood hunched over the rubbish bag for a moment, without making a move. "Any friend would have done the same," she said to encourage herself and continued as if nothing was wrong. After she was done, she opened the kitchen door and walked the bag down the small pathway and threw it into the big waste bins at the back of the garden. Three doors down, a woman, about the same age as her, was peaking through the trees, watching Vivi as carefully as she could.

"Bonjour," Vivi said in French and waved at the neighbor as if everything was fine. She then walked inside without giving the encounter a second thought, leaving the woman to come to her conclusions. After visiting him at the hospital, and helping with his recovery, she considered being in his house her inalienable right.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs, unsure of her next move. Her cell phone brought her back to reality, the reality that dominated outside of the house she had invaded. The phone call was from the hospital. They said they would need a couple of signatures but that it was nothing urgent; she could take care of it next time she came to visit. Also, they added, if everything goes as expected, then soon mister McCormick could be transferred to another room, on the same floor but without having to share with other patients and, of course, with way less supportive machinery. She promised them she would be by the following morning to take care of the details.

She smiled at herself smugly and ascended the staircase with sufficient confidence. She wanted to examine the guest room on the first floor again. After entering and looking to her left and right for a few moments, she noticed something she had missed the first time around. This room had been left unoccupied for much longer than she had initially thought, and the musty smell was much stronger. So, the first thing she did was push the curtains aside and open the window for the room to get lots of fresh air. A cloud of dust whooshed around her as she secured the curtains and waved her hands in protest.

"London air," she muttered in disapproval. The door was left open behind her. She opened the window overlooking the garden at the

end of the hallway, hoping to improve the situation. She did the same in James's room. Vivi decided to leave the windows open for an hour and visit them later when their atmosphere had improved.

She felt rather hungry. She took two eggs from the fridge, some cheese, sausages, and some bread rolls from the freezer. As she lit the stove, she laugh.

Look at me getting all homey in a stranger's house, like I'm some relative. Soon the doorbell will ring with surprise guests. The thought seemed so funny to her she had to go to the bathroom and pee out of laughter.

When she returned to the kitchen, she looked around for something to drink. She thought of the likely places she would keep a bottle of wine if this was her kitchen. Vivi opened a cupboard that looked like it could be the cave and sure enough inside she found some black ales, a couple of bottles of English wine and, to one side, almost hidden, was a French 1884 Cuvee. She paused. She preferred that French wine for its aroma and, in fact, always kept a few bottles in her own house.

"It's expensive and probably doesn't pair well with fried eggs and sausages, but my friend, I promise I will replenish your stock when I am done." She opened the cutlery drawer and found a bottle opener, opened the bottle and filled a glass.

"Santé," she said, raising it.

After dinner, she remembered that she had left all the windows opened upstairs and dragged herself up the staircase to close them. She wasn't in the mood for investigating. She went and lay down on the sofa and didn't even realize how fast she fell asleep.

She was woken by the sound of her phone ringing relentlessly.

"Where are you?" Jacqueline asked.

"I didn't leave the house all day," she responded in a soft voice.

"Vivi, were you sleeping? Did I wake you? Don't tell me you were sleeping!"

"I was not!"

"Oh yes, you were. I know your voice and all the ways it changes daily. What the hell are you doing?"

Vivi said nothing for a while.

Hello, I am Alive!

"Your tricks won't work on me, you hear?" Jacqueline continued.

Vivi burst into laughter. "I'm tired. What did you want me to do? Go all the way to the hotel and come back again? I need to find out who this man is and if he has any relatives left."

"But my dear, isn't that the police's job? I told you, you can't pretend to be Poirot!"

"Oh merde, Jacqueline! There's nothing fishy going on. An online friend is in the ER and, since I'm here, I wanted to help. I'm going to look for any documents in the guest room and then probably leave, anyway. What have you been up to?"

"Vivi, you are not acting rationally. Come to your senses. We'll talk tomorrow. Bonne Nuit."

"Goodnight to you, too. Kiss Bernard for me."

"Here we go again. Why do you punish me? Next time I'll let you transfer those kisses yourself!" Jacqueline replied and hung up the phone, laughing.

That woman will never be serious! Vivi thought and smiled. She walked up the stairs and headed straight for the guest bedroom closet. It had two drawers at the bottom. She opened the first one. It was full of what looked like curtain rags and their corresponding curtains rings. She turned to the second one. Inside was a small bag full of old textbooks with a hardcover. She took the bag, shut the drawer, and went downstairs to the living room.

It had got dark, so she decided to go back to the hotel. She took the bag she had found with her, making sure on her way out that all the windows were closed. She locked the front door and strolled to the train station.

An hour later, she had freshened up and was heading for the hotel dining room carrying the bag full of textbooks with her. Today she wanted to share her findings with other people. Even if they weren't involved, their presence alone was enough. She got comfortable, ordered a glass of white wine and a cheese plate, and opened the bag. She took out the first textbook out of the pile and opened it to its first page. It was James's mother's journal. In calligraphic letters on the first page, she has written: 'Judy Simpson, Personal Journal.'

Vivi read James' mother's diary, even though she had a slight nudging feeling about it. She knew she was looking behind closed doors, but the woman who had written it had been dead for many years now. In the back of her mind was the excuse that, in doing so, she might find some useful information about the rest of the family that might eventually help her friend.

Not long after, she was flipping through the teenage years of the diary. The woman's teens had been funny and entirely inappropriate. She paused at a page with some lipstick drawings and a list of some names of what she could only assume were high school boyfriends. She noticed there were significant time gaps between the entries. It was a sign that the diary was no longer a major priority in the writer's life, but more of an emotional motif in need of a means of expression via ink and paper.

Vivi flipped through a couple more pages. By this time, Judy was a young woman. A date on the upper right-hand corner caught her attention. September 8, 1940. It was the date when the bombing of London started. Judy admitted her fear and worry about what might happen if the Germans entered England. Her descriptions were vivid and engrossed Vivi. It was no longer the writing of a silly young girl whose primary interests were flirting, but a deposition of distress in the event of an imminent invasion. This entry was followed by another time gap, broken only by a newspaper clipping taped to the top of the page reporting on the great fire of London that followed the bombing of London on December 29, 1940. She lifted the yellowing piece of paper. It was barely legible. On the back, it wrote: 'My mother and father died in ruins. She had visited him with a packed lunch. What will happen to me now they're gone?'

Vivi stopped reading. She felt a tightening in her chest.

"Poor thing," she muttered and pulled a cigarette from the packet, shaking her head. What could a girl do who's lost both her parents? She had read a lot about the war since Havre was near the front and had been a crucial location for both sides, but never had a few lines of agony touched her so much. She felt tears forming in her eyes and thought maybe it was time to put the diary away.

If I let my emotions get the better of me, I'll never get through all

Hello, I am Alive!

this, she told herself, and pulled it open again. She flipped to the newspaper clipping. An entire month's gap followed. It was February 1941 by the time the next few entries were made. She spoke of how she would go to the same underground bunker every time there was an air raid and how there she had met a young man from Scotland, a mister McCormick.

Vivi closed the notebook containing the chronicles of the now long gone Miss Judy Simpson, late Mrs. Judy McCormick. There were no descriptions or details on any of the family in the next two notebooks, either. Her husband seemed to have indeed been a godsend.

"She was lucky in her unlucky fate," Vivi exclaimed, causing the couple at the next table to turn their heads in wonder. She smiled at them and immediately lit a cigarette with an apologetic nod.

In her mind, James' life, at least his early life, had been revealed to her, even if in a somewhat unorthodox fashion. The diary made her think about how she had met her husband and felt melancholic that he had left so soon. She didn't want to think of such a thing, but right now with all this Judy McCormick story so fresh and all; she just couldn't keep the memories at bay.

She and Jacqueline and a few other schoolmates had gone to Barcelona. They were seniors in the financial school of the University. On the night before their departure, they met an officer of the Merchant Navy, Victor, who had flirted with her persistently. He had asked for her address and she, not thinking it was important, gave it to him. On his next leave, he visited her in Havre. Vivi had been beautiful in her youth and had many who wished to attain her. She chose Victor Filibert as her partner and, even though she lost him too soon, she had never regretted it.

Jacqueline had tried many times since then to marry Vivi off, but to no avail. She had had a few relationships but kept them strictly physical and not much else. When she got bored, she would end them and regain her peace of mind.

How funny life is! She thought. I've met so many men, yet none of them made much of an impression. And now, this stranger, whom I'll probably never be intimate with, has spiked my interest. I better

not tell Jacqueline that one!

She chuckled and gave the couple at the next table a sideways glance. They were desperately trying not to pay attention.

I should get going. They'll think I'm crazy and they wouldn't be wrong! I have to go to the hospital tomorrow too. What could they want with me?

She reached the hospital reception around ten. The girl who was on shift directed her to go to the professor's office, the one who was in charge of all ER patients and whom she hadn't seen last time. After explaining how to get there, she told Vivi she would also need to go by the administration on her way out. Not wanting to seem nervous, Vivi just smiled, pointed towards the elevator as if to say she knew her way around and saying nothing scuffled towards the ER before she had time to hear the young girl call out, "... in the second floor!"

Vivi stood outside the professor's office, took a deep breath, put on a smile that was highly ambiguous, and knocked on the door. A voiced told her to come in.

"Good morning, misses McCormick," said the doctor, hanging up the phone, being informed by the girl in the reception for Vivi's visit.

"Vivi Filibert" she replied.

"Oh! They informed from the reception that you're here for mister McCormick, so I assumed you were his wife. I'm sorry."

"That's alright; I'm just a friend. James isn't married."

"I'm James' supervising doctor; we haven't met. I'm Arthur Powell."

He motioned her towards a chair, and Vivi sat down. She put on a sweet smile this time and said: "Yes, I had met another doctor last time."

"He is my assistant," he smiled. "He told me of your visit, but I wanted to have a tet-a-tet chat with you."

"Oh, what's wrong Arthur?" she said in her distinct accent, its intimacy catching him off guard.

The doctor was about her age, perhaps a couple of years younger,

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tall and appeared to be in good shape. His hair was grey, and he had a short beard, same color, and perhaps a bit too well groomed. He wore a white shirt, and a stethoscope hung around his neck as if an imaginary crew were filming his every move. Above a cabinet on one side of the office were various diplomas framed on the wall, while in the cupboard were some pictures of the doctor, mainly with one woman and a child at different stages of growth.

"I would say that the news here is mainly good news. James is stable and won't need assisted breathing anymore. If he hadn't had that second mini attack afterward, he would have left the ER already. But I am cautiously optimistic and will keep him here under supervision just for another few days. But we can still transfer him to another room if you'd like," he told her, looking at her straight in the eyes as if that might get her to agree.

Vivi looked at him without responding.

"They told me that this had been your request. Am I wrong?"

"No," she replied, as if suddenly snapping into consciousness. "When James can be moved?"

"As soon as the financials are taken care of at administration," he said, his brown thickening just slightly. "If that is not workable, then he will be transferred to a ward covered by his insurance."

"No, no. I want James to be in a private room." She added, as if that hadn't been made clear during their conversation.

"Alright, I will arrange for his transfer and meet you there. It's the room on the far right of the ER. The floor supervisor will show you the way."

"Is that all?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. We will meet again." Arthur got up from his chair, a sign that the conversation was over. Vivi followed suit. He extended her hand to her. "I hope everything works out alright."

His handshake was warm, and Vivi felt flooded by a pleasant emotion.

What a strange encounter! Vivi thought, believing that she had said nothing too dangerous to the professor. She walked out of the office to the cafeteria. She wanted a coffee, but mainly she wanted to smoke. Vivi got her cappuccino to go and stepped out into the

courtyard. She hadn't had time to take a drag from her cigarette when her phone rang.

What the hell! Is there some kind of radar on that damn woman? She thought and tried to reach it into her bag.

"Bonjour, where are you?" was the first thing Jacqueline said.

"Just got out of bed where I had a passionate night. You?"

"Me, well, I've been thinking about your offer. To come visit you."

"And Bernard?"

"I already sent him to Brigitte's. So?"

"Are you thinking of coming over here?"

"You're not exactly in the North Pole! You're just up the road on the map, and if the map is small, you can barely notice the distance. But only under one condition. We have to stay at his house."

"Are you serious? That's just not on."

"But you don't mind paying for your 'English Patient' to have his room your."

"Now, why would you say a thing like that?"

"The room or the other thing?"

"Both!"

"I remember you were crazy about the movie, so I attributed your craziness more to the movie than serious decisions. Now, about the room, I probably understood it from what you were telling me all these days. So collect your things from the hotel and come pick me up tomorrow afternoon from the train station."

"Had you already decided you were going to come here before you called me?"

"But of course! Got to go now. I'll let you know when I arrive."

"Jacqueline, wait!" she said, but Jacqueline had already hung up.

Vivi lit a second cigarette. She hadn't even noticed how she smoke the first one while chatting. As soon as she was done, went to administration.

What a nutter she is! She thought, and then thought about her deeds and smiled.

At the administration desk, they asked her to sign a bunch of papers and told her that James' insurance had gotten in touch and

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had come up with a definite cost. The extra amount needed to be wasn't a lot, but it wasn't precisely a negligible amount. She signed and left for the hotel. James would move to the room after lunch. She decided to return and see him in the early evening. The hotel was so close it would seem more like a stroll.

That afternoon, she returned to the hospital a bit late. She had with her the diary and some other documents she thought might be useful. The girl at the front desk greeted her by her first name.

How odd! Cross Vivi's mind. Once on the second floor, the ER supervisor helped her find his new room. It was small, but it had its bathroom and a small table with two armchairs. One of them turned into a bed in case any of the night shift staff needed it. She put her bag on the table and walked to James's bed.

"Let's see what is going to happen to you!" she told him, as if he could hear.

[James]... A sudden explosion filled everything with light. It seemed to him like a high, bright dynamism had formed and was hovering above the horizon. It swayed left and right as if it hadn't decided where it wanted to go. Eventually, it moved towards him even though all he could see was this light increasing and fading as if walking towards him and then drawing back.

A thought was formed like a thin mist in mid-air and, like a small cloud, circled the dynamism in an embrace.

"What am I?" formed the question somewhere unspecified, followed by "What's my name?"

The dynamism with the light that was getting brighter around him stood still for a moment, as if to size him up with a sideways look. Then it was gone again on its endless journey from one side of the horizon to the other.

Vivi thought she saw his eyelids move ever so slightly. She looked at him as carefully as she could but, whatever had appeared, it had only been fleeting. James was lying on his back on the hospital bed, various tubes connecting him to multiple vials. He didn't make a move. Vivi continued talking to him.

"I read your mother's diary. Who could say that your mother met your father right around the time she lost her parents, and even during the war? Well, they weren't exactly in the war, but they met because of it. Now, I don't quite get why she had such an apologetic tone, but then again, why am I telling you all this? You can't understand me, anyway."

She sat in the armchair and went through the pictures she had brought with her. She paused at one with James and his mother in front of a Ferris wheel.

That must be in London, she thought nostalgically and reminisced on something similar in her childhood.

"Right, mon ami, I'm going to give you the latest news. Tomorrow, I'm moving into your house. I wasn't planning on doing something like that, but then again, I wasn't planning on staying so many days in London, either. Hospital and hotel together aren't cheap. You'll say: 'OK if it's you, but Jacqueline too?' Whatever you say, you'd be right. Get well, and we'll sort it all out."

She surprised herself with her words and suddenly felt terrible. She was miles from home, away from her usual habits, on a trip with false prospects. Vivi was sure she wasn't chasing a random stranger. That was the last thing on her mind. She had flirted many times at Havre events and never needed to do any of this.

What's wrong with me? She wondered perhaps for the first time in days. Vivi looked at James on the bed. She felt complete indifference towards his figure, lying there, yet there was a strange emotion within her that was just waiting for the chance to reveal itself. She narrowed her eyes in thought, trying to dive deep into her unconscious. It was as if she had walked down a brightly lit garden path that led her to a darkened corner. She thought she could hear running water. It was a dark beach. Frightened, she opened her eyes.

"Damn you," she said to the silent room.

[James]... And suddenly the dynamism made a fell swoop towards, like a liquid seagull in free fall. Below, he could distinguish a choppy sea. He crashed to the surface and sunk into dark waters. Everything went black.

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He was hastening to the ocean. The ocean? How could he know such a thing? Indeed, the dynamism was swimming through the depths of the sea. He was led by a sort of knowledge without memory, an experience that lived in the seabed's unconscious mind. For a moment, he floated above a water gorge. And then he dove even more in-depth.

The shipwreck lay lethargically on the bottom of the ocean bed. The merchant ship was cracked along its entire length. At the bow, one could hardly make out its name painted to the left and right of the bow. Dynamism stopped at the massive crack in the stern. He felt overcome by a sort of illuminated clarity and, like a jellyfish with the shape-shifting form, he slid inside the interior. He was moving like he caresses the boxes with the goods that have been rotten for years and been opened up and set apart their content as ready for inspection.

He reached a staircase and went up it. The liquid seagull swam past the cabin corridor and kept going. He went to the bridge. Two skeletons in blue uniforms were like they had stayed behind to do everything they could to save the ship. A locket hung from one of the skeleton necks, the small picture that once was inside stolen by the ocean.

James appeared as he had stopped breathing. Vivi looked at the monitor and barely caught a drop in his pulses, and then everything seemed to return to normal.

"Don't you even dream of dying on me!" she told him loudly, waving a slender finger at him. "First you wake up and take responsibility for your actions, then you can do whatever you want. Understand me?"

She looked at her finger extended mid-air and paused. It felt as if someone else had just uttered those words. She rose from her armchair in a fit of panic, grabbed her bag, and ran out of the room and down the stairwell. She didn't even think to take the elevator. The cold air made her feel better. With shaky hands, she lit a cigarette and sat on a bench to smoke it in peace and calm down.

A little while later, wholly calm but with the incident buried as

deep down as she could, she went back to the hotel. She informed the reception that she would depart the next day and retired to her room. Her trip to Liverpool to see her son was coming up. Those first few days had flown by already.

The next morning, she packed her bags and went down to breakfast. As she sipped her coffee, she felt uneasy about going to James' house, and strange thoughts cluttered her mind.

What the hell am I going to do if a police officer shows up? She immediately tried to think of the scenarios. I'll tell them James asked for me to come, that I've known him for a while and if it comes to it, I'll just give them the hospital phone number. If they tell them I'm paying for his care, there won't be any problem!

Now that was done, she enjoyed her breakfast, paid and headed to the train station. As soon as she sat down on the train, her mind wandered to James again.

Where am I going to sleep? Evidently not in his bed! Let Jacqueline rest there. I'm going to the guest room. Her mind wandered further. I should buy some food for the house. And get a key made because if we lose this one, we'll never get back in again!

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't even realize how fast they had reached Woodside Park. She crossed the air bridge and soon was unlocking the front door with the hidden key. She walked inside with unease. Her decision to stay here seemed beyond logic. She put her bags down in the living room, then walked to the kitchen door that led to the backyard and unlocked it. She walked to the sink and opened the tap, letting the water run to clear the pipes. Vivi noticed a receipt was stuck to the fridge with a magnet. It was from the local mini market.

"Well, you sir obviously get your supplies from here, so am I. And maybe even get some insider information on your life."

She sat at the computer and wrote the mini market's address into the map application.

"God bless my nephew for showing me how to look up places on the internet," she said to nobody in particular, trying to memorize the address off by heart. She'd need a basket to transfer all the

shopping. She thought she had seen one in the little storage closet underneath the stairs. Indeed, there was one. Vivi took it out, got her handbag, locked the door behind her, and headed to the mini market. She and Jacqueline would have to eat something until they figure out their next move. She didn't want to buy too many things. Not only because they would leave for Liverpool soon, but because she feared that might her son dissuade her from coming back.

Her efforts to extract some information from the market clerks were fruitless. The woman behind the counter remembered him, but that was about it. Didn't know his name, or where he lived. She did, however, politely mention it to her manager in case he knew more about this mister McCormick, and she would report back next time Miss Vivi came to the store. She took down James's name and his home phone number and tacked it to a corkboard on the wall next to the cash register. Vivi smiled, paid, and left.

An hour later, she was back at the house with all she needed. Jacqueline would be there in the early evening, so Vivi had time to cook and eat without rushing. She made beef bourguignon, served herself a plate, poured herself a glass of red wine, and sat down to enjoy her meal. She raised her glass and said,

"Santé James. Thank you, and I hope I get to make you this dish one day, too."

She looked at her watch. With cooking and cleaning up, she hadn't noticed where the time had gone. Soon she would have to leave for the train station. She took her things up to the guest room, opened the window, and stripped the sheets from the bed. She got a clean set from the linen cabinet and made the bed. Vivi covered it with a light blanket and emptied her bag. The cupboard in the room was almost empty. She hung her clothes up inside, leaving only her underwear inside the suitcase. She looked around, felt pleased, and then checked her watch. In forty minutes, her friend would be there. She and Jacqueline would call each other on their cell phones in case they got lost. Vivi was sure it would come to that. As she walked to the train station, she smiled and sent her a text message: 'May I remind you we are meeting at the main exit on Pancras street?'

Vivi got there about ten minutes too early. She stood near the edge of the platform looking out for her friend, who would show up at any moment. Sure enough, she caught sight of her through the crowd, and their eyes met almost instantaneously. They hugged and exchanged kisses on the cheek in a manner more French than they realized.

"You look refreshed," said Jacqueline.

"It's London. Not only do they look at you here with curiosity, but you open your mouth, and they hear your accent, and melting for you. You don't look so bad yourself."

"Vivi, it's not even been a week since you left, so cut the wise gal talk. Where are we going? And just so you know, I'm hungry."

"We're going to 'King Cross' to get the metro. I've cooked for both of us, so we'll be eating at home."

Jacqueline smiled and linked her arm around Vivi's, and they set out, not saying a word until they were sitting side by side on the train.

"So, what have you been up to?" Jacqueline asked.

Vivi looked at her in wonder.

"What do you think I've been up to? I feel like a nurse. Thank goodness I'm going to Liverpool tomorrow. We'll see what the boy has to say about all this."

"Oh shush, I won't hear any of that. The boy has nothing to say. He's a grown man who needs to understand that his mother's personal life is none of his business. It's as if anything has even happened!" she replied. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"You better stay here and rest."

"Why? Who told you I'm tired? If I stay here, I'll get tired because I'll be trekking in the shops all day!"

"As you wish. Let's go home and eat, and we can decide."

"Is there any wine in the house, or should we get some?"

"I've taken care of everything, at least for the first two days. After that, we can play it by ear."

"How far is Liverpool from here?"

"Two-and-a-half hours by train and there's a train every hour. Françoise has arranged for a car to pick me up and take me to the

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ship. But, keep in mind, we'd have to get up at the crack of dawn the next day to leave again. We can have them drop us off at the John Lennon airport, and we can catch a morning flight back. How's that sound?"

"That sounds fine to me."

Their conversation ended there. A little while later, Vivi and Jacqueline were crossing the bridge over the train tracks towards the house. As soon as they were inside, Jacqueline left her suitcase at the bottom of the stairs, threw off her shoes and sunk into a couch.

"As an unofficial hostess, make me a sandwich and put a pot of coffee on, will you?" She stood up as if remembering something important and walked to the window. She pushed the curtain aside and looked out. "London! What about it? If you can't see the ocean from your window, it ain't worth a damn." She let the curtain drop and sat back down.

Vivi smiled in empathy. She had only been gone a few days, but she had already been missing the view of the ocean. She preferred not to mention anything and instead focused on making her friend a sandwich.

[James]... He thought he could hear a weird, repetitive beat. But he couldn't figure out what it was. It was as if everything was happening for the first time. It sounded as if the banding was coming from inside of him. For the first time, aside from the sound, he also felt a movement come along with it from the same source. A concept was forming out of nowhere: heart.

"What does that mean?"