

THE CORAL THIEF

A Novel

Rebecca Stott

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Ghostwalk

The
Coral Thief

✦ A NOVEL ✦

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SPIEGEL & GRAU

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Table of Contents

Cover	
Other Books By This Author	
Title Page	
Dedication	
Chapter 1	
Chapter 2	
Chapter 3	
Chapter 4	
Chapter 5	
Chapter 6	
Chapter 7	
Chapter 8	
Chapter 9	
Chapter 10	
Chapter 11	
Chapter 12	
Chapter 13	
Chapter 14	
Chapter 15	
Chapter 16	
Chapter 17	
Chapter 18	
Chapter 19	
Chapter 20	
Chapter 21	
Chapter 22	
Chapter 23	
Chapter 24	
Chapter 25	
Chapter 26	
Chapter 27	

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

Further Reading

List of Illustrations

Reader's Guide

About the Author

Excerpt from Ghostwalk

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Once grant that species [of] one genus may pass into
each other ... & [the] whole fabric totters & falls.

—CHARLES DARWIN, *Notebook C*, 1838

*W*HEN AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-ONE I traveled to Paris from Edinburgh by mail coach, carrying my luggage fossils and the bone of a mammoth, I still believed time traveled in straight lines. It was July 1815, only a few weeks after Napoleon had been defeated by the Allies at Waterloo. War with France was over, restitution had begun, the borders were open again. Time stretched out like a long road in front of me—toward a vocation. I was to be a man of science, assistant to the illustrious Baron Georges Cuvier, professor of comparative anatomy at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris.

But fortunately for the man—or boy—who imagines he is heading in a straight line toward an illustrious future, there are highwaymen on the road, brigands in the trees, there are ambushes and skirmishes and falls to be had. If he takes a single step off the road into the undergrowth, where branchings and forkings chance along a different axis, he might begin to see the sublime contingency that is at the root of everything. He might find a different set of answers there.

And so it was that, with a night ambush on a mail coach, my voyage of discovery began. I was just one of scores of medical students traveling to Paris that summer.

She could have chosen any of us. But she chose me.

I N THE DARK HOURS of a hot July night in 1815, sitting on the outside of a mail coach a few miles from Paris, I woke to the sound of a woman's voice, speaking in French, deep and roughly textured, like limestone. We had stopped outside a village inn whose sign creaked in the night wind. *Attention*, she said to the driver. *Be careful*.

I opened my eyes as a tall figure, her head obscured by the hood of her cloak, climbed into the seat beside me. Groaning with the effort, the driver passed up to her a large bundle wrapped in a red velvet blanket. It was a sleeping child; I could just make out a dimpled hand, the sleep-hot flush of a cheek, and a curl of dark hair. The woman spoke softly to the child, soothing it, rearranging the folds of its blanket.

"There are several empty seats inside, madame," I said in French, concentrating hard on my pronunciation.

She answered me in perfect English: "But who would want to sit inside on a night like this?"

Her voice was surprisingly low for a woman, and it stirred me. The black of the sky was already shading to a deep inky blue over toward the horizon. Mist hung over the fields and hedgerows and gathered a little in the trees on either side of the road.

"Is it safe in France for a woman to travel alone?" I asked as the coach lurched back into movement. The Edinburgh newspapers regularly reported attacks on carriages traveling at night across open country.

She laughed and turned toward me, her face illuminated by the light of a half-moon. Over to my left somewhere a rooster crowed; we must have been passing a farm or a village. "But I am not traveling alone," she said, dropping her voice to a whisper and leaning toward me. "I have Delphine. She is no ordinary child, you see. She is asleep now, of course, so it may be a little difficult for you to believe, but this child, she can fight armies and slay dragons. I have seen it with my own eyes. I have seen her lift an elephant and its rider with a single hand. *Non*, I am entirely safe with Delphine. Otherwise, of course, I would never travel alone. It is far too dangerous. What about you, monsieur? Are *you* not afraid?"

"I—"

"No, of course you are not afraid." She smiled. "You are a man."

"I have never left England before," I stammered. "I have never traveled so far or had to make myself understood in another language. Three times I decided I must take the next mail coach back to Calais ... I've never felt so much of a coward."

She laughed, her voice mesmerizing in the darkness. "There it is. Paris. See the lights ahead ... on the horizon? We will be there by dawn. Imagine ..." She stopped suddenly, gazing out toward the flattened shapes of the distant hills. "Sometimes it's easier to see all that water in the darkness."

"I can't see any water," I said, confused.

She pointed from right to left. "Everything you see from there to there, the entire Paris basin, was under water thousands of years ago. Paris was just a hollow in the seafloor then. There were cliffs of chalk over there, see, where the land began. Picture it—giant sea lizards swimming around us, oysters and corals beneath us, creatures with bodies so strange we couldn't possibly imagine them crawling across the seabed. Later, when the water retreated, the creatures pulled themselves onto the rocks to make new bodies with scales and fur and feathers. Mammoths wandered down from the hills to drink from the Seine, under the same moon as this one, calling to one another."

"That's a strange thing to think about," I said.

"*Oui.*" She laughed. "I suppose it is. But I think about it often, this earth before man. I look at the fossils in the rocks, the remains of that time so long ago, and I think about how late we came. Even the sea slugs appeared before we did. It took thousands of years for these bodies of ours to take shape, for our clever eyes and our curious brains to come to be. And now that we are big and strong, we think everything belongs to us, that we know and own everything."

"*Come to be?*" I said, surprised and a little alarmed. "So you think species have changed? You are a student of Professor Lamarck, the transformist?"

"I was once," she said. "Lamarck is right about most things. Species are not fixed. Everything is changing, all the time. The animals, the people, the hills—even the little things like skin, hair, everything is constantly renewing itself, taking new shapes. Just think of what we have come from—simple sea creatures with no eyes or hearts or minds—then think of what we might yet become. Doesn't that excite you?" She ran her fingers across the child's face. She—Delphine, the dragonslayer—stirred, her eyes flickering open for a moment and then closing again.

"Paris is riddled with infidels," Professor Jameson had warned me back in Edinburgh. "They are poets, these French transformists, not men of science. They dream up notions about the origins of the earth and the transmutation of species. Castles in the air. Most of them are atheists too—heretics. Steer clear."

Jameson had not mentioned that there were women who had studied with Lamarck. I wondered what he would make of this infidel sitting beside me now. I would have to record this conversation in my notebook, I thought; Jameson would want a report. He would want to know the kind of words she used, what she had read, whom she talked to. So did I.

"It will get bigger, you know," she said, her eyes shining in the dark with a touch of malevolence.

"What will?"

"The city. It doesn't look so big now, at night, but it will swallow you up. Are you not afraid?"

"Yes." I smiled. "Yes. Of course I'm afraid."

Paris aroused complicated feelings in me then. What did I know of cities—the sound of

thousands of people moving together, the tangled dealings of commerce and trade? I had always been a country boy. I knew the insides of the cave networks and mine workings of Derbyshire; I knew the angles and curves of the hills, the names of trees, ferns, lichens, and fishes; I could tell you how the light fell across the lakes, but I knew almost nothing of cities.

Edinburgh—quiet, solid, rainy Edinburgh, hewn out of the rock and built across a ravine—where I had lived and worked for four years, had overwhelmed me as a seventeen-year-old boy arriving by carriage one frosty morning. As I slipped through the crowd of Princes Street I could scarcely feel the beginnings and ends of myself in the roar and flow of it. So I had anchored myself, establishing daily routes between the lecture theaters, the anatomy school, the libraries, museums, and taverns. Despite the best efforts of my fellow students, one of whom urged me with mock seriousness to fall in love for the sake of my health, I had lived largely in and among books.

I had seen London fleetingly, passing through from time to time on my way from Edinburgh to my family home in Derbyshire. One day in May I walked from the inn where I was staying to the optical-instrument maker's shop in the Strand and bought a bronze-case microscope in a velvet-lined box with money I had saved for three years. On that brief walk through London, for all its smoke and smell and noise, enraptured me. My curiosity, that shapeless thing that drove at me relentlessly, that propelled the search for origins and explanations and connections, my desire to see further and further into the insides of things that had compelled me from the day I had touched my first microscope, or turned the first page of Aristotle's *History of Animals*, or opened the encyclopedia at the page marked "Anatomy," had seemed all the more heightened in London. There were answers to be found in cities; there were libraries, instrument shops and museums and professors who knew how to pose extraordinary questions.

Now that I had graduated, I wanted more than anything to be part of what was happening in Paris—the conversations and discoveries in the debating rooms, the libraries, and the museums. The French professors, given authority, freedom, and money by Napoleon, were making new inroads into knowledge. The museums in Paris were remarkable, the lectures groundbreaking. But it was also the city my father and his friends feared and loathed, the Paris of the Revolution—a city of people so hungry they had marched on Versailles, stormed the Bastille, imprisoned and then killed a royal family. I thought about the newspaper report my father had kept that described the guillotine swallowing up lives, thousands of them, blood in the streets; mobs; children with sticks and garden tools hunting down the children of aristocrats and beating them to death; a king made to wear a red cap; bloodied heads on spikes; the grocer burned alive on a pyre made of furniture thrown from the windows of the palaces of émigrés.

Then there was the Paris of Napoleon Bonaparte. I had seen drawings of the buildings and squares and streets the Emperor had built: the vast classical perspective of the Arc de Carrousel and the Arc de Triomphe; the new bridges and water fountains; the classic façades, colonnades, marble columns—all so cool and quiet—the imperial aspirations of the Emperor laid serenely on top of fire, blood, and death. Paris was to be the new Rome, Napoleon had declared.

Now that Napoleon had been captured, Wellington had restored the French king to the

throne—Louis XVIII, they called this one; the brother of the guillotined king. But everyone was still half expecting Napoleon to rise again, like a body that just wouldn't drown. Anything could happen, and I wanted to be there to see it. Whatever *it* was going to be. There was going to be a spectacle of some kind.

“Daniel into the lion's den ...” she said.

“How do you know my name?” The coach lurched so that my body crushed up against her shoulder in the darkness. “Pardon, madame. Have we met before?”

“A Portuguese priest taught me some tricks in a bar on the Amalfi coast,” she said, turning her head toward me with a slow smile. In the lightening of the morning, I could see her face for the first time against the black folds of her hood.

She was darkly, heavily beautiful. A woman of middle years with black eyes and olive skin and thick black eyebrows that almost touched in the middle, making the shape of an archer's bow, a falcon in flight. Even in the half-light, the directness of her gaze startled me. She held me there, her eyes searching out mine, her lips forming the faintest of smiles, but I could not look back, not directly, though I wanted to. Always immersed in my studies, and growing up as a boy among boys, I had had little practice conversing with women. I felt myself blush and began to stammer. “What tricks?” I asked. “What did he teach you?”

“My friend, the abbé Faria,” she said, “is a magnetist. He is half Indian, half Portuguese. He taught me many things. I put you to sleep for a few minutes, and then you told me everything—first your name, your family, your dreams ... and then your secrets. Now I know all your secrets. Every one.” She smiled.

“You didn't put me to sleep,” I said. “That's ridiculous.” I looked at my pocket watch. The hands were still moving clockwise at the same rate. It was half past five. I was certain I had lost no time.

“How can you be sure, monsieur?” She was no longer looking at my eyes; now her gaze had settled on my lips. Her eyes on my lips, her thigh against my thigh, her shoulder against mine. I could feel the heat of her body through my clothes. In the early-morning light, with the child sleeping in the crook of her arm, she looked like a painting. Almost sacred. Yet the intimacy of her talk and manner disturbed me.

“You must be about twenty,” she said, examining me more closely. “You remind me of someone I once knew. You have the look of a Caravaggio boy—your dark curls, your skin, your coloring, your eyes.”

“Caravaggio?”

“The Italian painter.”

“Yes, I know who Caravaggio is.”

“I think it's something about your lips. Your beauty begins there, in your lips. Some of Caravaggio's paintings are in the Louvre. You should go and see them.”

“I am twenty-three,” I said, exaggerating a little, while trying to steady my breathing. Could she see my discomfort, my body betraying its secrets?

She smiled. The wind had picked up. It tugged at her cloak and blew through her hair. She pulled the cloak further around the child's head. The child, disturbed, woke for a moment and

sat up, black eyes wide, her black hair disheveled and wild, and said in French, as if still dreaming: "*M. Napoleon, il est mort.*"

"No, no, little one," the woman replied in French, "it's only a dream, just a dream. M. Napoleon is sleeping safely in his own bed. Really. His soldiers are guarding him. Now, go back to sleep. We will be in Paris soon."

The child, comforted, dropped her shoulders, closed her eyes, pulled the cloak around her head and was soon sleeping again.

The woman turned back to me, her voice low and lingering. "Your name is Daniel Connor. You are studying anatomy at the medical school in Edinburgh. You have written up your dissertation. Probably, I think, on something to do with generation or embryology—"

"The circulation of the blood in the fetus ... How did you ...?"

"And now you come to Paris to study at the Jardin des Plantes, M. Daniel Connor. You think about philosophical questions. What else? Am I correct so far?"

"How can you *possibly* know that?"

My voice, when I spoke, was shaky. I was tired, I reminded myself. Just that. And the woman was a specter. Probably just a figment of my imagination, conjured in the night.

She laughed again and gestured toward my traveling bag, which sat between us on the sea table open.

"You are labeled, my friend ... here." She ran her fingers over the letters engraved on the inside of the bag. "You see: DANIEL CONNOR, MEDICAL SCHOOL, EDINBURGH. I guessed the rest. You are easy to read."

"That is not fair," I said, relieved. "You have taken advantage of me."

"You see," she said, "I am a great investigator. We say *enquêteur*. There are many Edinburgh medical students like you in Paris now. They come to listen to the French professors of the Jardin des Plantes: Professors Lamarck, Cuvier, and Geoffroy. I like to watch them. They amuse me."

I didn't like to think of myself as just one of many, but she was right. For me and for hundreds of other medical students in July 1815, all possible roads led to—or through—the great Jardin des Plantes. Built as an herb garden on the banks of the Seine for a French king in the seventeenth century, the Jardin du Roi had, with the severing of a king's head a hundred years later, become the Jardin des Plantes, a garden for the enlightenment of the people. Twelve venerable French professors lived in the Jardin in the elegant houses built among the museums, libraries, glasshouses, and lecture halls, professors who between themselves knew how to formulate questions about everything in nature and would soon, without doubt, I believed, know all the answers. In a few weeks, Professors Lamarck, Cuvier, and Geoffroy would no longer be names on scientific papers or abstracts, they would become real people to me, fellow explorers and patrons. The prospect awed me.

"How long will you stay in Paris, M. Daniel Connor?"

"I don't know yet. I have six months' employment in the Museum of Comparative Anatomy in the Jardin des Plantes, working for Professor Cuvier on a new volume of his book—some illustration, some dissecting. I will be an *aide-naturaliste*. After that I have a little money. M.

uncle died and left me a small inheritance. I shall use it to travel.”

I could see it as if I was walking through it—colonnades and staircases and hushed libraries. The universities of Europe. I saw botanical gardens and shelves stacked with glass jars of yellowing liquid preserving the shapes of rare animals and fishes. I heard animated conversation at a distance—voices speaking in Spanish, Italian, German. I pictured myself there at the center of it all: on the steps, among fountains and bougainvillea, in shady lecture halls—arguing, questioning.

Derbyshire was a backwater as far as ideas were concerned. None of the members of the local Natural Philosophical Society at Castleton, which now had a substantial collection of fossils and bones displayed in its museum, had read James Hutton or Georges Cuvier or even Alexander Humboldt. They were not philosophers but myopic collectors arguing over taxonomy, I told myself, counting angels on a pinhead. Only three men in the town of Ashbourne—the vicar, the doctor, and the judge—knew Greek. Even Edinburgh Medical School, when compared with the medical schools of Paris, seemed to be locked in the past century. I had attended all the lectures in anatomy, geology, and natural philosophy several times over by the time I graduated. The university library, where I had first read volumes of Shakespeare and Locke and Fielding and Scott as well as anatomy textbooks, closed and opened at unpredictable hours; it had no catalogue and an impenetrable shelving system. The anatomy theaters were always full to bursting, and you couldn't get a seat or see what was happening; there were never enough cadavers for us to work on.

Meanwhile the medical students I knew who had spent a winter at the Jardin des Plantes came back whispering of lecture theaters filled with the cleverest men in Europe, libraries overflowing with thousands of volumes of specialist books, museums crammed with specimens from every corner of the world, new dissection and classification techniques, and ever more powerful microscopes. Paris had become a kind of mirage in my mind—a shimmer of light on the horizon.

I had only my inheritance, but I had merit, and in France, people said then, merit still counted for something. Napoleon Bonaparte had proven that. His rise to power had been theatrical and spectacular: Corsican country boy comes to Paris during the Revolution, becomes a soldier, becomes lieutenant, becomes artillery commander, becomes general, becomes first consul, becomes Emperor of France. He was breathtaking. You couldn't not admire him. In fifteen years he had captured most of Europe, swept his way with his Imperial Army through city after city, like a high tide across mudflats, to establish himself as one of the greatest rulers the world had ever seen.

But of course, although I admired Napoleon perhaps above all men, my father would not permit my journey to Paris until the Emperor had fallen. By the time I arrived, Napoleon was already a captive on the HMS *Bellerophon*, while the Allies quarreled about what to do with him.

In 1815 Napoleon's fate seemed strangely—inversely, superstitiously—bound to mine. Just as my journey began, his seemed to be coming to an end. As I reached Paris, he was already heading away from it. Europe had begun the process of remaking itself, redrawing its borders, and forming new alliances. The trajectory of Napoleons power, at first relentlessly upward, like an arrow in flight, had started into its downward curve. I would follow the

newspaper accounts of his journey all through that autumn, measuring my own days against his, spellbound, as I would have watched the trail of a strange comet across the night sky.

* * *

“I plan to leave Paris in the spring,” I told her, “and travel down to Montpellier and then to Heidelberg, then across to Padua and Pavia. My father does not approve. He thinks I should buy a practice in Derbyshire and settle down or study for the church. He says I am a dilettante. He says philosophical questions are of no practical use in this world. He does not like France or the French.”

“And your mother? What does she think?”

“My mother always agrees with my father.”

Over thirty years my mother had adapted to married life and a house full of large and noisy sons by retreating to her room with a vague, unnamed medical condition. *Your mother is not to be worried*, my father insisted, using her constitution as a way of ensuring compliance from his sons. Conversations with my mother were almost entirely conducted in hushed tones in darkened rooms. I remember a table of colored bottles like stained glass in her drawing room and the thick burnt-flower smell of laudanum that hung about her like incense. She had little interest in my childish obsessions with butterflies, newts, and fossils, but she taught me to draw and paint watercolors of birds and plants, which I would bring to her like offerings.

“If your father hates the French,” the woman said, noticing my distraction, “why does he let you come here?”

“My professor at Edinburgh wrote to him several times pressing my case. I am the youngest son, so I think he is more indulgent with me than with my brothers.” I didn’t tell her how many times Jameson had used the word *exceptional* in his letter to my father or that he had described me as the finest student in my year. I had worked hard for that word *exceptional* and for his letter of recommendation to Cuvier.

“So you will take the Grand Tour.”

“Well, no. Not like that. Paintings and ruins are interesting enough, but it’s the natural history collections and libraries I want to see. Knowledge, not art. That’s what’s important now. Advances in knowledge. We will soon discover the key to all of nature’s laws. Soon we will know God’s purpose and design—”

“God’s design,” she said. “Are God and Nature the same thing, or different? I find that a difficult question. Nature? Is she God’s agent, his servant—doing his work for him, following his plan, or can she go her own way? And I wonder if they argue sometimes, Nature and God—it seems to me that they want different things.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

She baffled me. I had never met a woman who thought about philosophical questions. The women I had spoken to at the dinner tables of Derbyshire or Edinburgh seemed only to want to gossip about people or novels or to talk earnestly about the poor. I wasn’t very good at talking about those things and hadn’t really listened. “You are much too serious with women, Daniel,” my brother Samuel had once said. “They really don’t want to know about your microscopes and your fossils and your butterflies.” He was right. They didn’t. I had long since

given up talking about natural philosophy to women.

The horses, sensing the closeness of their destination, picked up the pace. We passed another group of French soldiers by the side of the road, wounded Waterloo veterans making their way wearily back to Paris. I had sketched several groups of soldiers since leaving Calais and had tried repeatedly to capture the details of the war-torn landscape. I had drawn fields full of ripe corn and no one to harvest it; rubbish blowing in the warm wind; half-empty villages, every second house boarded up or left with its doors and shutters flung open. I drew the white flags that peasants had suspended from windows and rooftops and trees. I sketched disoriented soldiers, some badly wounded, others being dragged on boards tied to horses traveling home, carrying their swords over their shoulders to support bundles of clothes and food, women in uniform walking alongside them.

“It is a good plan, of course,” she went on, “this one of yours to travel. But what will you do when your money runs out? Go home? Become a doctor? Marry and have children? Grow fat? Stand for Parliament, perhaps?”

“No,” I said. “I have to make my own living. I’m not ashamed to say that. But I want to continue my studies, and if I’m careful with my money... I might—”

“You have a letter of introduction to Professor Cuvier?” she asked, yawning.

“Yes, from Jameson. And some specimens to present. Do you know him, Professor Cuvier? What is he like?”

In my mind’s eye, Baron Cuvier appeared larger than life. Perhaps that had something to do with the bones he worked on—the giant bones of mammoths and megatheriums dug out from the quarries of Paris or brought to him from the canal workings or mine shafts of all over Europe. I imagined him walking through halls of bones, through the bellies of whales. He knew more than anyone, could make them speak. He could see how they fitted together, how the joint here fitted with that foot there. He could take a single fossil toe bone, they said, and rebuild the entire skeleton of the creature from it. I wanted him to teach me to see what he saw. That’s why I was in Paris. I wanted to see through Cuvier’s eyes.

“He is stiff,” she said. “Rather formal in his manner, but clever, very clever. A very important man in France. You seem young for such responsibility.”

“Yes ...” I hesitated. “Well, no ... I am one of the oldest in my year. My friend—”

“You have much to see in Paris, M. Connor. The natural-history collection at the museum in the Jardin is beyond compare. I cannot imagine what it will be like to see it for the first time. I envy you. I would like to show you, take you there.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“Of course.” She laughed. “We’re almost in Paris now. Perhaps another hour or so. See how the light is lifting up the color in the fields—they are not flat anymore. The shapes are filling out and the stars have almost disappeared.”

“The mammoths have gone back to the hills,” I said.

“One day, when the water has retreated even more, you will be able to walk from London to Paris. There will be no more English Channel. Your country will be joined to mine.”

“It will?”

“Well, perhaps not soon. It might take a few thousand years. And who knows, perhaps then we will have wings.”

In a sleeping village on the outskirts of Paris, the mail coach stopped to change the horses. A dog ran alongside us, barking. A young woman, awake in the dawn, stepped into the doorway; a small child strapped to her back stared up at us, bleary-eyed.

“I can’t keep my eyes open any longer,” my companion said. “I shall sleep. You should too.”

I leaned against the leather side of the seat, watching the hunched silhouette of the driver beneath me, his clothes coming into color in the light of the morning, steam rising from the backs of the horses. I glanced over at the woman who had pulled her cloak around her and the child curled in sleep. I wondered why I had not asked her more questions. What else did she know? I felt the mail coach lurch one last time, and tired and hungry, I fell asleep, thinking of mammoths lumbering in the dark.

When the mail coach stopped at the Barrier of Saint Denis an hour later, I woke to find the woman and the child gone, along with my travel bag and the small case containing the specimens. She had left me only my identity papers and my wallet, which had been placed under my arm as I slept.

Two notebooks of writings and annotations. Years of precious notes on natural history taken from books I might not find again and from experiments I could not hope to repeat. A book of sketches. Letters of introduction from Professor Jameson. The cases of specimens and the manuscript entrusted to me—gone.

Startled, and still half-asleep, I turned to look for her among the ragged tangle of buildings that made up the outskirts of the city. But she was nowhere. Outrage gave way to bafflement, then a sickening sense of my own stupidity. *I had fallen asleep*. I might as well have given my possessions away. I climbed over to the luggage rack, turning over bag after bag, trunk after trunk, calling out to the driver for help. He was busy reining in the horses and only cursed me in French and shouted that I had better return to my seat unless I wanted to get everyone killed.

A Scottish soldier standing guard with several Prussians at the barrier called out for my identity papers. The English passengers passed papers through the window of the coach below. My spirits lifted for a moment at the familiar sight of the tall soldier in his kilt.

“Sir,” I called out. “My bag has been stolen.”

“Welcome to Paris, my friend,” the soldier called back.

“What should I do?”

“Go to the Bureau de la Sûreté and report it. Give yourself a few hours. There’s usually a queue. Want me to lend you a few francs?” He passed my papers back.

“No. I have money. She didn’t take my money.”

“She didn’t take your money?” He turned to the Prussian soldier, mimicking sexual gestures. They laughed: a joke at my expense. “There can’t be a single woman in Paris who doesn’t want your money. They’re not cheap, mind. Forget your bag, monsieur, and fire

yourself a woman. Just make sure you get what you pay for—and don't fall asleep.”

The coach lumbered through the gates and into the city.

 ON THAT SAME HOT NIGHT, IN JULY, *the Emperor Napoleon lay sleepless in a small bed on board the*

HMS Bellerophon, a British ship making its way around the westernmost point of France, about to enter the English Channel. Its captain, the Scotsman Richard Maitland, also lay awake, listening to the sound of the gulls and calculating how long it might take Parliament to decide the Emperor's destination. Someone had to find an island secure enough to keep the Emperor a prisoner this time. There must be no further escapes. It was a responsibility that weighed heavily on Captain Maitland. There would almost certainly be a rescue attempt.

At the other end of the ship, the Emperor lay in his bed, looking back on the trajectory of his life thus far, wondering what had happened to break the rising curve of his power. His luck had begun to falter for the first time only a year before, in 1814, when the Allies, afraid of what he might do, had defeated his armies, captured him, and imprisoned him on Elba, an island off the coast of Italy. It had been a humiliation almost beyond endurance.

But he had shown his captors what it meant to be Emperor of France. While the Allies were congratulating themselves on their victory, he had escaped from Elba and had marched on Paris a second time in March 1815. He had retaken and occupied the city for a hundred days but then been defeated by the Allies a second time, at Waterloo. Now he was a captive again, at the mercy of the British government. But, he thought, if he had escaped the clutches of the Allies once, he could do it again. His men whispered daily of rescue attempts and plots. Perhaps the British would grant him free passage to America after all.

At dawn the Emperor appeared on deck in his famous gray greatcoat. Midshipman George Horne, anxious about the slipperiness of the newly scrubbed decks, offered Napoleon his arm. On the port side of the deck, Napoleon stood in silence for the rest of the morning. His entourage—his generals, their wives, his servants and valets—gathered around him, but he spoke to no one, keeping his eyes fixed on the lighthouse on the isle of Ushant and the slowly receding coastline of France.

AS THE COACH MADE ITS WAY along the length of the Faubourg Saint-Denis, I looked for my thief among the soldiers in vividly colored uniforms and the men and women pushing handcarts, carrying flowers, wood, fruit, and vegetables into the city from outlying farms. Narrow cobbled roadways to each side trickled with stinking water; ancient lanterns hung from ropes overhead. All down the street, as far as I could see, haberdashers were hanging long strips of bright calico outside their shops like flags. On street corners old men clustered around smoky braziers, roasting fish and meat. I was hungry.

I tried to make out the full magnitude of what had happened. Professor Jameson, reminded myself, seeking to build bridges between British and French science now that the war was finally over, had entrusted me with gifts and a manuscript to take to Professor Cuvier, probably the most important man of science in France. The specimens and the manuscript were irreplaceable. The loss was not only an embarrassment, it was a scandal. This would almost certainly mean my return to the gray streets of Edinburgh, or to my father's house, shamed. Even if I went to the police and could make myself understood, even if the specimens were found and returned, the story would be the same: Daniel Connor had lost the rare and irreplaceable gifts entrusted to his care because he had dropped his guard and fallen asleep on the mail coach, seduced into a false sense of security by a beautiful woman. It was pitiable.

The mail coach turned into a wide covered courtyard, where half a dozen other coaches were drawing up at the same time. Drivers were unloading towers of luggage from roofs; porters were bustling about and attendants shouting. "Dis way, sare; are you for ze Otel de Rhin?" "Hôtel Bristol, sare!" Cards were thrust into hands; English voices jabbered. "Hicks, Hicks, take the coats and umbrellas." "Count the packages, John. There should be twenty-seven." There were nurserymaids, carpetbags, hatboxes, cloaks, and trunks everywhere. "Enfin," I heard an old lady say to her daughters, yawning and rubbing her eyes with her cambric handkerchief, "*nous voilà!*"

"Hôtel Corneille," I said to the first porter who met my eye. Grinning, he lifted my three suitcases onto his handcart and set off on foot. I followed close behind, lest the man suddenly take off with the rest of my possessions. On each side of the street shopkeepers were opening up their doors to morning trade, setting up their windows and storefronts; waiters put out tables; fiacre drivers washed down the wheels of their carriages at the street pumps or brushed down their horses.

Paris was now a military encampment for the Allies. Everywhere uniforms made a mosaic of color in the morning sun—helmets, bearskins, two-pointed hats, plumes, epaulettes, sunbursts and grenade ornaments, standards, cravats, buckles, and shoulder cloaks. The British, someone had said, had set up camp right in the middle of the Champs-Élysées, the white conical tents clustered along the walkways under the plane and chestnut trees. Russian soldiers, young men with flaxen hair, round caps, and tightly tapered waists, sat about

smoking and telling stories in the cafés. Prussians were in blue, Hungarians in dark green, Austrians in white, British in red, French in blue and red decorated with silver.

Was I glad Napoleon Bonaparte had fallen? No. Of course not. None of us at Edinburgh had been glad, despite what we might have said at the dinner tables of our professors or in the company of our elders. Napoleon Bonaparte, not Wellington, was the real giant killer.

Of course I had kept silent when my father muttered over his morning newspaper, saying how he would hang the captured Corsican bastard if he were in charge in Paris, how he would make a public spectacle of him. And there was the fact that it was only after Wellington had defeated Napoleon on that battlefield at Waterloo that my father finally gave his consent to my European travels. “British order,” he had declared, thumping the dinner table with his fist, “is exactly what those barbarians need. We’ll show those French savages a thing or two.”

Now the decadent, aristocratic atmosphere made it almost impossible to imagine the ferocity of the mobs that had so recently surged through here. A military band played music at the door of one hotel where, the porter told me, the Emperor of Austria had his quarters. Valets carried out chairs from the hotel and placed them under the shade of the trees.

My spirits began to lift.

In the rooms I had taken in the hotel in Saint-Germain, as close as I could afford to the Académie des sciences on the rue de l’École de Médecine, I washed, changed my clothes, and sat down to think. I had no idea how I was going to explain to the police what had happened. A woman thief, traveling with a child, had stolen a letter and notebooks that were useless to her and specimens whose value I could not believe she fully understood. She had not taken my money. It made no sense. A few hours ago I had a letter from Professor Jameson and Professor Cuvier commending me to elite circles of medical and scientific savants in Paris and precious gifts to present. Now everything was gone. Without Cuvier’s references and support there would be no conversations in the leafy courtyards and colonnades of great universities; there would be no illustrious future among Europe’s savants.

I paced the small bedroom between the window and the sink for twenty minutes or so, talking to myself, veering light-headedly between self-accusation and outrage. It was only when I bruised my right hand badly by punching the wall several times that I decided to file a report at the Bureau de la Sûreté.

I poured water from the jug beside the sink into a basin and found my razor and the small pot of shaving cream. Since I had left Edinburgh these daily rituals had come to be important. They provided a kind of tethering, a connection to home. Rising at seven o’clock, a morning walk, breakfast, a shave. I studied my face in the cracked mirror as my skin became visible with each sweep of the razor. It was a face that seemed to look different every morning and despite the familiar features—black curls, blue eyes, a full mouth, the tiny scar on my chin where the hair wouldn’t grow—I did not recognize myself.

I was trying to remember the features of the woman’s face so I could report the theft to the men at the Bureau when there was a knock on the door. A heavily built, bearded young man with bright eyes stood on the threshold of the hotel landing, clutching a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Before I had time to speak, he had stepped into my room, set the bottle and

glasses down, and clasped my hand warmly.

“A fellow countryman,” he said in a lilting Scottish accent. “The concierge has been talking about you for days, ever since you wrote to reserve the rooms. It’s been M. Connor this and M. Connor that. She calls you *the young English gentleman*. Well, well. My name’s William Robertson, from the Western isles. I was at the medical school at Edinburgh too—been in Paris a year. I moved into the hotel a couple of weeks ago. It’s expensive but close to work. I thought a celebration might be in order. I’ve been saving this.” He held up the bottle. “It’s not as cold as it should be, I’m afraid, but who’s complaining?” He placed the glasses on the table and uncorked the bottle with his teeth. “Glad to meet you, M. Connor.”

“Daniel,” I said. “Daniel Connor. Mr. Robertson, can you tell me where the Bureau de Sûreté is?”

“Actually, everyone calls me Fin,” he said, “because I’m supposed to look like a fish. It’s the mouth, I think.” He passed me a glass of champagne and began to look over my books and equipment, which lay scattered on the bed.

“I don’t think you look like a fish,” I said, though I realized that he did, now that I thought about it. A big fish of course, with a large mouth.

“You might not think that a man with a beard could actually resemble a fish,” he said, peering at himself in the looking glass over the fireplace, moving his jaw around roughly, opening and closing his mouth, grimacing. “But it appears that I do. To others, of course, not to myself. It was just a joke at first—Salomon’s little joke—but it stuck. I don’t mind. Anyway, Daniel Connor, I’d be glad to show you the ropes. If it’s ropes you want.”

“I’d be grateful if—”

“You know, Paris is completely infested with medical students from Edinburgh. There’s practically a colony of us over at the *École de médecine*, and at the lectures in the *Jardin des Plantes*. But there are students from everywhere else too—Romania, Hungary, Spain, Russia. You’ve come at a good time. Where are you headed?”

“The *Jardin des Plantes*. I’m supposed to start working for Cuvier, and I thought I’d sign up for the winter lectures as well. Comparative anatomy’s my line, or at least it is for the moment, but—”

“Aha. A job with Cuvier? Impressive. None of that philosophy’s for me. Brain just won’t do it. I spend my days walking the hospitals between the *École de Médecine* and the teaching clinic at the *Hôtel Dieu*, following the coattails of Sanson the surgeon—amputating. That’s my line.” He made a gesture as if he was sawing through logs.

“Amputating?”

“The soldiers are still coming in from Waterloo. Hundreds of them, laid out on mats in the hospital corridors, legs and arms black with gangrene. The smell is so vile you can hardly breathe in some rooms. Most of them are beyond saving, but we have to go anyway. All the foreign anatomy students are learning their trade with the hacksaw too. Long hours and good money. And sometimes Sanson lets you do dissection and autopsy work on the corpses.”

“It’s almost impossible to get hold of bodies in Edinburgh now,” I said. “The anatomy professors have to make them last for weeks. They even fight over them.”

“Christ. There are hundreds here every week. The hospitals send most of the corpses over to the anatomy clinics while they’re still warm. Can I buy you a drink?”

The bottle was already half empty. I was thirsty and had drunk the two glasses of champagne as if it had been lemonade. I wasn’t used to drinking. In Edinburgh I’d never had enough money as my father had kept my allowance deliberately small in order to ensure that I kept away from what he called “fleshly temptations.” It had been as much as I could do to pay the bills for the oatmeal and potatoes, which most of the medical students lived on, and I was always hungry.

“No. I mean, yes,” I said, grateful for the blurred feeling the champagne had made in my head. “Let me buy *you* a drink. I have some money here somewhere. I’ve never been in France before. You know, I think I might need breakfast.” I tipped my bag onto the bed, searching for the French money I had exchanged, money that was now mine to spend as I chose. “I haven’t worked out the coins yet.”

“Your French—is it any good?”

“It’s getting better. I can speak a little German too and read Greek and Latin.”

“Got a good stomach?”

“I think so. What for—alcohol or dissection?”

“Both. I did three amputations last night, you know: a hand, two legs. The hand was the worst. More nerves. More blood. As soon as we’ve bandaged up the poor sods, they’re out on the streets in their uniforms, begging—there are lines of them in the arcades in the Palais Royal. They make decent money. And the wooden-leg makers in Paris have never had it so good. They’ll be out of business soon though, now that Napoleon has been taken. No more wars, no more wooden legs.”

“Embryology was my specialism,” I said. “In Edinburgh at least. I don’t think I’d be very good at amputations.”

A flock of pigeons flew past the window, casting shadows on the whitewashed wall.

“I tell you,” Fin said. “I always need several drinks after the night shift to make sure those bloody limbs don’t come flying at me in my dreams.”

He glanced over at the map unfolded on my bed. “You don’t want to use those guidebooks,” he said. “They’ll only take you to the places all the English tourists go—all the bloody sights. You’ll be on the same carousel as Lady Bloody Carmichael and little Georgian and all their cronies. Just plunge in, I say. Find your bearings. I’ll show you around. Be glad to. I’ve got the day off, you know. You are a lucky man. William Robertson will give you a personal tour of Paris. Where do you want to start?”

“The Bureau de la Sûreté,” I said.

“Why the bollocks would you want to go there?”

“I’m in trouble,” I said.

“There’s no trouble you can’t get out of,” Fin said, clapping me on the back. “What have you done to your hand?” My knuckles were grazed and swollen. “A fight? Already?”

“Stupid,” I said. All the connecting words were beginning to disappear.

I told Fin about the papers and the fossils. Well, I tried to explain, but of course, I couldn't. There was no logic to it. I could see the consequences though. I could see the future rolling out—or rather not rolling out—clearly enough. No chance to prove to Cuvier that Jameson was right to choose me over the rest, no way to prove that I was *exceptional*. All that work all that time—the late nights, the exams and books—come to nothing.

“I’m sure Cuvier’s a reasonable man,” Fin said, taking a chair in the corner where the morning sun fell in slanting lines. “You know what I would do? I’d write to Jameson and get him to send another set of letters. That should take a week or two at most. And then you can start over.”

“It’s worse. I was carrying a manuscript for Jameson—a copy of his preface to an English translation of Cuvier’s book. I was to give it to Cuvier for his approval. That was stolen too. And there were the fossil specimens I was supposed to give to him. Worth a fortune. Cuvier was expecting them.”

“That’s not good. No, that’s not good at all ... *Merde*. You *are* in trouble.”

“I think I will have to go home. Explain everything to Jameson. I’ll be finished of course. I feel so *stupid*.”

“First things first. You’re in Paris after all. That has to be worth something. Let’s get breakfast and some more champagne and have a feast. We’ll wipe out your bad night and mine with a few good bottles. And then I will take you to the Bureau if you still want to go. But it won’t do any good. The men there won’t be interested in finding your things because there’s nothing in it for them. Breakfast?”

“Yes,” I said. I was too tired and hungry to argue.

“You brought your own knives, I hope,” he said. “You can’t get a pair of scissors or a scalpel or even a decent knife for eating with in Paris at the moment, not for love or money—and believe me, I’ve tried both.”

No, I thought, she hadn’t taken my dissecting instruments or knives—they were packed in the suitcases. That was something.

As we walked together to the first tavern, Fin threw information at me at every turn, pointing this way and that: the best place for breakfast, the safest place to gamble, the cleanest swimming spot on the river, the cheapest boats for hire, the most beautiful waitresses, the reading rooms where you could pick up English newspapers, the best laundry service.

I tried hard to remember at least some of these details but couldn’t move Cuvier from the center of my vision: Cuvier, arms folded across his ample chest, looming over me, saying “You did what, M. Connor? You fell asleep on the mail coach?” And behind him there were others waiting: Jameson, my father, my brothers. Daniel Connor was an idiot, a dunderhead, he couldn’t be trusted with anything.

And so it went on. The day stretched and tautened, glittered then darkened, each step further numbing, a fading of Cuvier’s censorious gaze. Somewhere in the cloud of that first day, the dust from the road still on my skin, I saw into a city that even London could not

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