

The

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I stood in line at Boston Logan airport three hours early like they tell you, sandwiched between a lady who wouldn't stop talking about a suicide bomber who blew up a dozen people in Barcelona that morning and a high school kid who must have been about Jack's age the last time I saw him. The kid kept whining about his cell phone that wasn't going to work in Athens, and I wanted to yank off the baseball cap hiding his eyes and yell hey maybe you should start with a thank you for being alive.

Then the agent at the head of the line asked what was the purpose of my journey. Honestly, he used those words. As if the real purpose of my, or anyone's, journey could be described to someone with a badge and a loaded gun while a couple hundred travelers waited to pass through screening for their final destination.

"I'm presenting a paper at a scientific conference," I said, which was a reason that could be proven, like a knife that an x-ray machine could detect.

"Do you know anyone in Paris?"

"Not a soul."

He checked my face against my passport and the head shot on the brochure I handed him in case he didn't believe me about the conference. I looked young for my age, and he raised his eyebrows when he saw my job title of professor at one of the private colleges in town. I could tell he was a rule follower because even though he knew by now that he'd turn up nothing, he checked the terror watch list for my name.

My name's Suzanne.

My mother majored uselessly in English and had a thing for poets who dabbled in darkness. She named me after the Leonard Cohen song about the woman who leads you to the river wearing rags and feathers from the Salvation Army. She named my brother John Berryman (Berryman being his middle name) for the poet who won a Pulitzer

for *Dream Songs*, then drowned himself in the Mississippi. My father played no role in naming us, other than to pass on what had been handed to him by his own father, the surname Alma.

I'm a scientist; I don't believe in fate. I do not know how to explain that I, Suzanne, came to study rivers and my brother named John Berryman, whom we called Jack, ended his life by jumping into one.

The flight attendant on the Dreamliner brought red Bordeaux and Perrier and salmon cooked to order. It wasn't my style to fly business class, but I'd spent twenty years of my life preparing for this trip. French hadn't come easily to me, the way it had for Jack. To me, spoken French was words crammed together, a secret mash-up only insiders could understand. He'd started studying his freshman year at the high school we attended in suburban Los Angeles. California was a place most teenagers would kill to live in, but Jack and I couldn't get far enough away. We had parents without boundaries and we were young, so we mistook physical distance for emotional space. We didn't understand that the parents you needed to escape lived inside you, too.

After I left home on a scholarship to Brown, and he found himself alone at home to deal with Mom and Dad, Jack started looking into exchange programs in France that accepted high school seniors. By then he was practically fluent.

I felt a nudge on my arm.

"Excuse me?" Small talk was not my forte. I had purposely avoided making eye contact with the traveler next to me, an older gentleman wearing a turtleneck and pressed trousers.

"I asked what brings you to Paris. It looks like you're traveling alone." He had white hair and kind eyes, and he looked like the father I wished Jack and I'd had. So I decided to pretend that he was and told him about the paper I was presenting on the topic of buried rivers.

"Like the River Styx in classical mythology," my seat mate said, his eyes bright. "Or the Acheron. The river Dante crossed in *Inferno*. '*Lasciate ogni speranza!*' He sipped his sherry with something approaching glee. "I'm Virgil, by the way."

Dante's guide in the *Divine Comedy*. Cute. "My name's Suzanne. I'm a scientist. The rivers I study are real."

"I'm fascinated, and we've got six hours to go. Tell me more."

A river has a life span over space, not time, I told him. A river's young when closest to its source, mature in the middle, old where it drains into the sea.

"But sometimes the river's life is cut short," I said. "Cities bury rivers. They cover them over with streets and sidewalks and cement." Wild, fluid, alive rivers, dirtied with human and industrial waste, then forced underground. To contain them. To hide the ruin. Allegedly to allow civilization to grow. If you knew where to look, I told him, you could find traces of subterranean rivers beneath New York, Moscow, and Sydney.

Below Brussels, London, Seoul.

"Paris?" he asked.

I nodded. "It has a buried river, too. The Bièvre." It flowed deep under the streets of Paris and emptied into the Seine.

Somewhere over the ocean, the old guy drifted off to sleep. In the transatlantic darkness, I listened to a podcast on my headphones, thinking how at forty, I'd finally be able to converse with Jack in French if he were alive, when the pilot came out into the cabin and told everyone that there had been an attack in Paris. A terrorist cell had taken over a French television station in the 8th *arrondissement*.

The plane landed. We waited on the tarmac at Charles de Gaulle for an hour while soldiers searched the airport. Someone from the embassy finally came on board and told us we should turn around and go back to

Boston if we had any sense at all. The airline had agreed to cover the cost.

“The government can’t guarantee your protection. Once you pass through the airport gate, you enter France at your own risk.”

“What the hell?” My neighbor pulled his airplane blanket tight. “I’m going home.”

Out the window, Paris shimmered in the distance. It was early spring. There was the conference speech I’d promised to give, but something else had called me here, too.

“What are you going to do?” Virgil asked.

“Bid you *adieu*.”

He clutched my arm. “This is a strange time. May the angels of Paris watch over you.”

I unclasped my seat belt (they had never turned the sign off) and exited the plane.

The Paris I entered wasn’t the black and white city of a lithographic past. This Paris had catapulted into a future that shouldn’t yet exist. Police were stationed at every corner, guns drawn. Yellow police tape cordoned off store fronts with cracked windows on cobblestone streets where people hurried with their faces turned toward the ground. The taxi driver made no effort to chatter. The hotel concierge warned me to return before dark, but I’d traveled the world in search of buried rivers. I knew how to hide. After showering and changing, I took a taxi to the Galeries Lafayette. I bought a French rain jacket and shoes and a copy of a novel by Camus in the original. All items were calculated to reinforce the impression that I was not a foreigner; I fit in; I belonged.

As soon as the conference began, it became apparent that all the plans I’d made, the maps and itineraries I’d drawn, could be shredded into scraps of nothingness. An armed guard asked to see my passport at the hotel foyer. In the grand ballroom, scientists huddled

below crystal chandeliers that would shatter into a thousand blinding pieces in an attack.

Every hour, the hotel manager showed up with a new tip on how to protect ourselves. There were gas masks stored behind the buffet — first come, first served. Crouch on the toilet seat so legs wouldn’t be seen. I attended the plenary session, trying to concentrate on talks about the degrading hydrology of the Minetta River under New York, and the lost waterway discovered deep beneath Rome. And although it was a gathering of scientists, someone gave a talk on the religious significance of rivers — the Ganges, the Euphrates, the Nile.

I typed every word spoken on my laptop, just to keep myself sane.

During the break, when I couldn’t take the despairing looks another second, I slipped out of a side door and walked under a cloudy sky to the places in Paris that Jack had spoken of. The Paris he knew was long gone. The Louvre was closed. At the Luxembourg Gardens, soldiers marched in groups of five or six, making no effort to hide their weapons or their fear. The bar where Jack bought morning coffee and brioche no longer existed.

Only Jean-Paul Sartre’s grave in Montmartre Cemetery seemed unchanged.

As the afternoon wore on, the ratio on the streets shifted to fewer civilians and more police. Being alone in a bistro made me nervous, so I bought bread and cheese and olives at a corner *marché* and made a picnic on the narrow bed in my hotel room after dark. I turned off the light and lay down. The small room reminded me of my dorm at Brown. Sometime during the winter of my freshman year — I remember it was winter because I was sick throughout the semester, missing classes, fighting off colds and flu, wearing sweaters and draped in blankets — Jack called. He’d won a scholarship to spend his senior year of high school as a foreign exchange

student in France. He was crazed with excitement, but there was something else in his voice, too; he kept starting sentences with “Hey, Suzanne, you remember when” or “what would you do if” or “did Dad ever” and then telling me never mind, and I only wanted to go back to sleep, so I didn’t think to ask anything more than where would he be staying (with a French family in the 13th arrondissement) and when would he leave (August eighth).

I worked that summer at a research lab in Washington, D.C. for the Forest Service. I never saw Jack. I never asked him what he’d been trying to say.

The television was on in case of emergency, as the hotel concierge suggested. It was after midnight, and I fell asleep listening to French cable news. The talking heads kept guessing when and where the next terrorist assault would occur. No one knew.

On a Thursday morning that dawned cold and gray, I skipped the plenary at the conference and made my way to the Pont de l’Alma. It was a pilgrimage of sorts. The bridge shared our family’s last name and was where Jack had taken his life.

“*Bonjour*, prof.” The detective, gray-haired and lean, shook my hand. “Sorry for your loss, but I’m not sure how I can help.”

“I want to see where it happened.” Inspector Dupont investigated Jack’s death two decades before. It had taken me a year to track him down. “I have a list of questions.”

“*Bien sur*,” he said, looking at the sky, “but today there isn’t much time for answers.”

“What was Jack’s point of departure?”

“I reviewed the file yesterday. Poor kid.” Dupont lit a cigarette like a cop in a gritty *noir* and led me to the center of the bridge. “A commuter saw him jump on Tuesday morning, March 27, 1997, a few minutes past

eight. Your brother wore a backpack weighted with stones.”

“Stones?”

“The kind used in landscaping. He bought them at a garden store the week before.”

I scribbled in my notebook. “Where was he found?”

“Follow me.” We hurried down a staircase to the quay a foot or two above the river. A few tourist boats churned up and down nearby. The detective kept touching his hand to his gun.

“The boy’s backpack became dislodged; we found it later. His body floated to the surface. It caught against the landing here,” Dupont said, tossing his smoke into the Seine.

He looked at me then, and though his voice was hoarse, his eyes weren’t callous, like I’d expected, but open and raw, as if he were remembering the long-ago events. “A boat captain found him. He leaned down to tighten a knot and saw a puffy face gazing up at him. It was a shock, I remember. He said he’d never seen a drowner before.”

My hand shook too much to note his response. “Could you describe the expression on the body’s face?”

The detective paused. “I don’t mean to be crude, but at that point, he was dead.”

I turned away for a moment, swallowing hard. Dark water that smelled of rotting fish lapped against the quay. “I intended to ask whether Jack suffered any physical pain.”

“If it makes you feel better, the coroner always says drowning would be his method of choice.”

His police radio erupted with static then. The words came like bullets, too fast for me to understand.

“It isn’t safe here,” Dupont said. He drew his gun. “You need to go.”

A helicopter droned toward us in the sky. Then a second, and a third. A police boat sped by, close enough

to spray drops of Seine over my body. An officer on board shouted into the wake.

“What’s happening?” I asked, hands clenching the iron railing.

“An attack. Sometime today.” Dupont spun around, scanning the crowd. “Take cover, prof. Now.”

Dupont turned his back on me and ran. I followed the quay as long as I could, breathing fast, then jogged up the stairs to the street. Police cars sped up and down the avenue. The first open building was a Catholic church. I ducked inside. A group of Japanese tourists huddled near the door.

“Everything will be all right,” a priest was saying in French, patting their shoulders. “*Restez calmes.*”

The group left a few minutes later; their hotel was only a block away. The priest walked to the front of the chapel where he lit a row of candles. “You can stay here, my child, until it’s safe to return to your family.”

The wood pew felt hard against my back. It was eleven o’clock in the morning. The hour when, according to the now-faded police report, Jack’s body surfaced on the Seine.

My jeans were damp against my thighs. The church smelled of incense. I closed my eyes.

It was Jack who introduced me to my first buried river. We rode our bikes one afternoon along the Mojave River in the San Bernardino valley east of LA. I was ten and he was eight, but he led the way, elfin hair, thin legs. It was one of those June days after school let out when we came up with plans to keep ourselves away from the house all day.

“Suzanne. Stop. It’s right here.”

We threw our bikes down on the gravel. Jack showed me the place where the Mojave disappeared into a tunnel below ground. We rode on for miles, looking for the place where the water emerged into sunlight. We never found it.

I opened my eyes. Candlelight cast shadows in

corners of the church. How much did the stones in his backpack weigh? How many seconds did Jack freefall through the air before he hit the water? How long did it take to die? Beneath the questions science could answer ran a river of questions science could not.

I sat in the half-darkness as the priest recited the rosary in Latin, a chain of words that repeated over and over in a language I did not understand.

When the sirens and the noise of chopper blades seemed to recede, I left ten euros at the altar and made my way in light rain, keeping myself small, staying close to the sides of buildings, taking old, narrow streets. Paris was quiet in a lunar sort of way. Sheer curtains were drawn over apartment windows. An empty bus rattled down the road, its diesel fumes stinking the air.

My eyes moved back and forth between the map I’d drawn and the ground. The thirteenth *arrondissement* had brass medallions drilled into the streets that traced the path of the Bièvre, the hidden river of Paris. I pulled the hood of my rain jacket over my head and followed the markers to the place in Paris where Jack had spent the last six months of his life.

I hurried, my steps keeping time with a sing-song phrase in my head. Little brother, little brother. Why had it taken me so long to chase his ghost? Jack was slight of build but never of mind. He had a wicked humor. We built a fort behind the garage where I dissected desert lizards and Jack wrote plays about towns where children locked parents in cages and whipped them when they misbehaved or forgot to cook dinner. We acted out the scenes, the neighbor kids shrieking, asking Jack where he came up with his weird ideas. At night, inside the house, I’d cover my ears, trying not to hear bedroom doors open and close. I slid into sleep, imagining what it was like to be a hidden river. To have my waters dirtied.

To be covered over, buried alive, without hope of seeing sunlight or rainfall or in high winds surging myself over the shore.

Little brother, little brother. I was in the middle of the thirteenth now, walking through Paris Chinatown, past a Buddhist temple, my senses wide awake. People asked what forces drove terrorists. A terrorist I was not, but I knew something about rage. Rage began in a hidden place where no one knew it existed, flowing bigger and wider and faster until, under pressure from containment, it leapt to an explosion. Explosions began then, faint, like a soft pelting of rain a mile away. Away but not far. Far too near my running feet. Feet that skipped steps on the pavement. Pavement that covered the Bièvre River far beneath.

Explosions a block away now, and the unrelenting sirens, and the sky opening with its rain and its bullets and the smell of sulfur. Little brother, little brother. Jack stuffed stones into his backpack and walked to the center of the bridge that bore his name. I understood his courage now. He felt death drawing near and did not turn away.

I ran as fast as I could.

I had come to Paris seeking answers and some kind of peace. So far, I'd found neither. I rang the doorbell at the blue house on the Rue des Orchideés. The door swung open, and the woman who'd been Jack's host sister pulled me inside. Véronique was about my age, but her face was creased from the sun, her long hair streaked with gray and pulled back in a loose ponytail. The skin on her hand felt calloused.

"Thank you for seeing me. And for hosting my brother all those years ago," I said.

"My parents took Jack in, not me. But okay," she said, leading me to a parlor filled with dated furniture. She gestured for me to take a seat.

"Is this table where Jack ate?"

"And you're sitting in his old place."

"It couldn't have been easy," I said, shivering from the rain, "dealing with a kid who moves in and then takes his life."

"You don't waste any time with niceties, do you, *ma chérie*?"

"I am looking for the why," I told her.

Véronique poured jasmine tea into mismatched china cups. "I don't remember much about him," she said, sliding a plate of cookies toward me, as if no battle waged outside, as if it were an ordinary Thursday. "Jack kept to himself in his room, mostly, the door shut tight. Went to school, always wearing the same flannel shirt, always the headphones. His job was to wash the supper dishes, which I was happy about because it meant I didn't have to." She shrugged. "I was in love with the bastard who's now my ex-husband, finding ways to sneak out of the house to fool around. My parents both worked. When they didn't work, they drank."

I took a sip of tea and waited. "There must be more," I finally said.

"I've told you what I can remember." She looked away, her fingers pressing against the edge of the table. "It happened so long ago."

"Twenty years." In the life of a river, it was not a long time. I picked up a cookie, brittle and flat, and broke it in half.

"I wish I could help."

"But surely a death like that —"

"Look, I'm sorry. My mother has dementia and my dad a bad heart. I have two kids in high school and my ex is late on child support." Véronique set her cup down. "Jack was a nice boy. *Sympathique*. Nobody had a clue he wanted to die."

"He lived here." My throat tightened. "You really have no idea why?"

Véronique walked to the window and stood looking at the cold March rain. "Today the terrorists bombed the

Lourve. They took a tourist boat hostage. High school kids visiting from Spain.” She turned toward me. “Sometimes there is no why.”

The jasmine tea tasted strong with fragments of dried leaves and flowers the strainer hadn’t caught. It was hard to tell if the pelting rhythm we heard came from helicopters or gunshots or drops of cold rain. The parlor was crowded with imitation art and tattered doilies and the smell of cooked fish, with memories of family collected at Sunday dinners, fights and laughter and sometimes stony silence. In science, there was always a why. But here I wasn’t a scientist. Here I was only Jack’s sister. And while Jack lived in this house, so, in a way, was she.

“There must be some memory of my little brother that I can take home. Jack was funny. He was creative. You never saw that side?”

Véronique walked around the perimeter of the room, lighting lamps against the gradual darkness. “You said your name’s Suzanne?” She sighed as she sat next to me at the oak table. “It must have been a few days before he died. We had an old guitar laying around. Jack came out of his room after dinner one night and played us a song. He said it was about his sister. He played it over and over, singing in English and then in French. He had a good voice,” she said. “It made my mother cry.”

Of all the buried rivers, lost and forgotten to the world, I grieved for the Bièvre the most. It once flowed free through Paris, a narrow river, more modest than the Seine. And like a father who picks one child to adore and the other to abuse, the industrialists of France saved the Seine and defiled the Bièvre with tannery sludge, slaughterhouse blood, human waste. When the river became infected with human and animal suffering to the point that it could no longer be used, the city fathers covered it, contained it, merged it below ground, forcing the river into the city’s sewer system. In a perverse

reversal of a Biblical miracle, the city turned water into piss.

My parents had Jack’s body cremated and shipped home in a plastic box. There was no funeral and no obituary. His ashes sat for years on a cabinet in the dining room, next to my father’s old turntable and a stack of Jack’s unopened mail. One time, after finishing my graduate degree, I took the box with me. When my parents didn’t seem to notice, I stopped going back. I moved from teaching job to teaching job until I landed a tenure-track position. It kept me in one place long enough to unpack what remained of John Berryman Alma, whom we called Jack.

I delivered my speech to the thirteen river scientists who’d remained until the last day of the conference. The business class seat next to me was empty when I flew home. The Bièvre has its own advocates now who believe the river should be unearthed. Perhaps one day they will succeed, and the buried river will once again be free.

- *Kristen Ray*