

Paris, 1921.

The glassy surface of the Seine River flowed with civility, neatly sundering in two at the *Ile de la Cité*. Like a citadel, tall walls rose from the water and amalgamated with its residential part. A quaint reading park, tucked away at the base of the islet where the water parted, contained a small garden and a pair of trees. With their autumn leaves blending, the willow and plane tree held each other like an elderly couple. Golden leaves butterflied between them.

Jacquie felt as if she was saying good-bye to autumn as well. Her focus came back to the glass, noticing the ghost of Great Aunt Adèle upon its surface. She studied Adèle studying her. Holding her bowl of coffee, Adèle's hands had a slight tremble.

"I want to feel as if I knew him," Jacquie said to the window, fingers settling on the porcelain cameo at the base of her throat. She hoped that would be enough to satisfy the question.

"I understand."

Jacquie adjusted herself in the chair and looked back to her. "It's one of the reasons I decided to make this trip."

"Yes, dear. Your parents said no one in the family has taken such an interest in him as you."

"It's also one of the reasons why I wanted to visit you in Paris before I left."

"But are sure about going alone? I want to know that you will be safe."

"Yes, I'm sure."

"It's very brave of you. Did you know that you are the first Mouhot to go to Indochina since Henri? That, after all these years, you are the first to follow in his footsteps?"

"I never really considered it that way. I believe I'm the first to receive such an invitation."

Her winter-cheeked cousin, Jean-Luc, who had no more presence than a shadow, was eying some loose notes in a book on his lap, fragile eyeglasses resting low upon his nose. Aunt Adèle sucked her mouth into a lipless smile and started to sway back and forth, feebly trying to get the chair to rock. Her limbs were nearly as thin as its wooden legs. She gave up. She appeared much weaker than the last time Jacquie had seen her. Jacquie had a concern of a kind for her in return.

Adèle said to her grandson, "Can't you separate yourself from your art history books for a minute?"

He looked up as if surprised, patted it shut, and let it hang in his hands like a loose tongue. "I was just organizing a few notes," he said. He reached behind his chair and inserted the book into his coat jacket.

On the walnut coffee table, a little bell. Aunt Adèle rang it. There was a book there

as well, a copy of Henri's journal, obviously placed in anticipation of Jacquie's arrival from England. A maid dressed in a white pinafore and headpiece entered.

"Oui, madame?"

"May I have the small jewellery box from atop the dresser in my bedroom?"

Adèle asked.

"Oui madame." The maid turned and disappeared.

"I have something which might help you feel like you knew him a little more,"

Adèle said. "By the way, your French has become quite commendable."

Jacquie hadn't seen them since the war and felt they were almost strangers to her now: Adèle less like a woman and Jean-Luc more like a man. Fortunately for him, he had been spared from serving in the war in any way on account of his age. The maid returned and offered a box to Adèle, who waited for her to leave before opening it, then withdrew a trinket on a chain, dangling it in front of her face with one age-spotted hand while inspecting it with the other. Jean-Luc watched attentively as Adèle handed it across the table to Jacquie.

"I want you to have this," she said.

Jacquie took it and rolled it over in the palm of her hand. It was a small brass compass.

"It belonged to Henri. Now it belongs to you," Aunt Adèle said.

Jacquie looked back up. She had never been given an heirloom before, let alone

such an intimate gift from her grandfather's illustrious journey. Gingerly, she caressed it and studied the black cardinal points through its bulbous glass. North looked fat.

Holding it in her palm, she imagined her grandfather holding it in his, and felt a kind of yearning in the hollows of her chest. She only knew him through the book which she had almost memorized while growing up. "I feel as if I don't deserve this," she said.

"Are you sure you want to give it to me?"

"Yes, of course," Aunt Adèle replied. "It belongs more in your family anyway. Your uncle gave it to me when I was your age, knowing how close Henri and I had been as cousins. It was as if I lost an older brother."

"How appropriate, now that you're making the journey as well," Jean-Luc said.

Jacquie rose and crossed around the table and kissed Aunt Adèle on both cheeks. Adèle retained her, holding her face and admiring her dark auburn hair. "You have his intelligent green eyes," she said and let her return to her chair. She lifted her bowl of coffee and wispy steam pirouetted over it. Sitting tall and proper, Jacquie mirrored the gesture. Jean-Luc craned his head down to his like a horse. Jacquie blew softly over hers and the dancing steam went flat. Her face was lapping faintly on the dark liquid, as if attempting to metamorphose into something else.

"Jacqueline, I want you to do a favour on behalf of the family, but it may be asking too much," Adèle said.

Jacquie peered over her bowl, wondering about the promise she was about to

make. "Yes?"

Adèle looked into hers momentarily and continued: "I would like you to place some flowers upon Henri's grave in Laos. It would mean a great deal to me to know that, after all these years, Henri's kindred have finally visited his grave. In fact, I thought you could take a photograph of it for me. I would like that very much."

With some anxiety, Jacquie recalled maps, wondering just how far up the Mekong River Laos was from Cambodia. Before she could reply, Adèle said, "You know, I had a premonition about Henri's death."

Jean-Luc's brow pushed up, lines growing on his forehead. "You did?" he asked.

"Yes, although some might call it superstition as much as anything else. When I received news from the doctor that father had died—a few years before Henri's death, I had been trying to re-light a lamp which had mysteriously gone out. The lamp had a new wick. Plenty of oil to burn. We had used it many times before. Anyway, the lamp was burning fine, then just went out, like that—," Adèle tried unsuccessfully to snap her fingers. "I wasted a lot of time trying to figure out the conundrum, trimming the wick, cleaning the chimney. Eventually I tried another wick, which also wouldn't take fire. It was then that I was interrupted by the doctor from father's room saying he was dead. The next day the lamp worked fine, as if nothing had happened.

"Anyway, I didn't think too much of it until a few years later. I had the same experience with the same lamp and another good wick. Again, the next day it worked

perfectly. I distinctly remember thinking: Well, this hasn't happened since father died. It was then that I thought of Henri in Indo-China and had the most awful feeling. Several months later we received the letter. I tried my best to recall the date when the lamp refused to light; I remember it was the week before my brother's birthday. I swear it must have been the same day as Henri's death."

The cousins remained silent and let the story air out like an old attic. Jacquie's eyes wandered and a Tiffany lamp caught her eye. Its iridescent stained glasses spread out like an umbrella, each miniature pane conjoined by cast iron. The bulb was still on, glowing behind a blue pane, warm and lambent. At the base, metalwork of flowers spread outwards. Coiled in the pattern of a seashell, a longhaired gray cat feigned sleep on the bay window. One of its ears was still listening in on their conversation. Jacquie thought its closed eyes were like slits on a baked pie. She looked back and said, "I've never heard that story before."

"I've never heard it either," Jean-Luc added.

"Is there anything more you can tell us about how he died?" Jacquie asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Aunt Adèle replied. She reached for the coffee table and picked up a decades-brown envelope from under the book and extended it to Jacquie, who took it in curious silence. She unsheathed its delicate yellow letter. It read in French:

British Consul, Bangkok

February 17th, 1862

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Claude Mouhot,

It is with profound personal remorse that I regret to inform you of the untimely death of your son, Alexander Henri Mouhot. He died on November 10th in Laos due to complications arising from malaria, a disease which he had been battling for over three weeks.

Because of the remote location of his death, it was necessary for his trusted guides to give him an immediate burial. Consequently, his body was interred in Laos, near Luang-Prabang. There is a Christian headstone bearing his name, reportedly within sight of the banks of the Nam Khan River, upstream from the village of Ban Phanom.

His letters, sketchings, maps, entomological and conchicological specimens are currently in the possession of our mutual colleague and friend, Dr. R. James Campbell, Surgeon R.N., who is affiliated with the British Consulate in Bangkok. These items were received from Mr. H. Mouhot's guides, in addition to some small personal valuables. Dr. Campbell will soon repatriate himself to Great Britain, at which time he will

return by hand all such items so that the articles may be appropriated under his family's discretion.

Mr. H. Mouhot left an indelible impression upon us in Bangkok during his stays here, where he would recuperate after his sojourns into Indo-China. His devotion to science and his benevolent disposition gained him great favour not only in Bangkok amongst his fellow expatriots, but moreover, even amongst the savages of Indo-China, who it is said spoke continually of his kindness and generosity.

His loss will also be deeply felt by the Royal and Zoological Societies of London, as well as all men of science.

Again, I express my deepest condolences, and can assure you of an expeditious reply should you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

Sir R. Schomburgh
British Consul, Bangkok

Delivered by
Lt. Yann Deschênes

Jacquie's great grandparents in Paris were the letter's original recipients. Her father would have been a toddler when his family in London received a similar letter. He would grow into the knowledge of being fatherless just as he would grow into his own legs. Upon request, Jacquie passed the letter to Jean-Luc.

"I promise I'll go to Laos and find his grave," she said. "I'll use my autochrome plates so you can have photographs of it in colour. I think it's a wonderful idea, it's the least I could do."

Aunt Adèle sucked in her lips and gave a smile. Jacquie looked out the window again, far off. Cathedral-coloured clouds covered the world like a roof. The *Arc du Triomphe* squatted at the horizon, its stout legs firmly grounded. *Le Tour Eiffel* stood poised to prick the sky.