

THE LOST DIARY
OF CÉCILE
DUBONNET

FORGETTING THE YESTERDAYS OF WORLD
WAR II

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To everyone who needs to be forgiven

PREFACE

Charon is the ferryman in Greek mythology who, for a fee, carries newly deceased souls across the river Styx that divides the world of the living from the world of the dead. One must wander the shores as a wraith for eternity if one cannot pay the fee, which for some is not the obol placed on the dead's eyes but absolution from their sins.

CHAPTER ONE

DISCOVERY

Tuesday, 19 October 1999

They say that your life flashes before your eyes the moment you die. Ironically, the same cannot be said for someone who has been waning for the past fifty-four years. The white-walled room did its best to confine her in its dull environment. The bed in the middle of the small room was neatly made with crisp white sheets carefully tucked in.

The room lacked shelves with pictures of family members or fresh flowers on the nightstand. To the room's inhabitant, there seemed to be no present and no future—just the lapsing pain of the past.

There was no use in keeping the door to the room locked from the outside anymore. The patient, Cécile, has not responded to anyone who was not Élizabeth, as she spent her days wheelchair-bound in the corner of her assigned room.

The old, frail woman stared out the window, her faded blue eyes sunken in her wrinkle-covered face. A

haunted hope surrounding her made the staff highly uncomfortable at their first interaction. The nurses of *Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne* were not afraid of residents who threw tantrums. They loved the challenge of working in the psychiatric ward and always prepared for the worst whenever they stepped into a room. They paid the most attention to schizophrenic and psychotic patients. There was slight, unnoticeable angst around them, mainly because they were utterly unstable, even when their medication worked as it was supposed to. Each day, they worked wholly prepared to encounter wild commotions, but patients who came in and out of stupor needed vigilance. They snapped when a strong current of unpredictability came and swept them out to the sea of the unknown.

“*Mademoiselle Cécile*, please calm down!” The nurse said, calm in a soft voice as she wrapped her strong arms around the fragile body and helped her back into the wheelchair. Cécile usually did not resist the nurses. Not anymore. She was too tired and weak to put up any fight. She obeyed quietly most of the time. However, something had triggered Cécile as she slowly transformed from a catatonic patient into a frantic madwoman.

“Please, no!” She begged out of nowhere as the nurse lightly touched her wiry, fading gray hair.

Cécile moved her arms back and forth before burying her tired face into her hands. She saw and heard something nobody else could either see or hear.

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“I will not do it. I cannot, oh dear God, make it stop! Stop it!” Cécile wailed, clutching her hair.

She continued mumbling tearfully, but she did not particularly speak to the nurse or anyone in the room. She begged for someone else in the distance, far away, perhaps someone in her memory. No one knew. The nurse did not mind her outburst as it was rare and mild compared to the other patients. Cécile continued sobbing and wailing as if her entire being were on fire. The nurse felt bad for the old woman who had spent most of her life in this institute in Paris, but she did not know her story and wondered what type of life she had led before she wound up here.

She gently tried to soothe the distraught Cécile.

“Élizabeth will come to visit you tomorrow, *Mademoiselle* Cécile!” The nurse said ecstatically, trying to distract the old woman. It was obviously a lie, but it was a lie that always calmed her down, no matter how often told.

She slowly gained composure before she faintly whispered Élizabeth’s name. Most nurses heard Cécile often muttering this name like one would whisper a prayer. “Élizabeth, Élizabeth, Élizabeth.”

The chanting soothed her as she rocked back and forth, like a mother rocking her crying child, until she nodded with a small smile. Her tantrum was long forgotten, and hearing the nurse saying Élizabeth’s name pulled her out of whatever nightmare she was plunged into.

The nurse sighed in relief.

“I will come back and brush your hair. Élizabeth cannot see you with your hair looking like a bird nested there. She

might think that we aren't taking proper care of you," said the nurse as she chuckled at her joke, but Cécile did not acknowledge her.

She had spent most of her years waiting for Élizabeth's visit, but sadly, Élizabeth never came. She was humming her name under her breath with hopes of Élizabeth hearing it in some way, but occasionally, this mantra brought the pain along with the hope.

Nurse Élizabeth was the only staff member whom Cécile showed any signs of life many years ago. Not only did Élizabeth care about her, but she also gained Cécile's confidence. She let Élizabeth comb her hair, change her gown, and put her to bed without resistance. They would walk in the garden while she could, often sitting on the bench, watching the flowers come and go with the seasons. She was a chatty and lively nurse who brought a small drop of happiness to the residents' lives, and Cécile was a good listener.

Élizabeth often wondered how much her patients grasped their surroundings. From time to time, Cécile would give a small sign that affirmed that her stories were being heard. Her face would light up, and she would smile at her now and then as Élizabeth told her about her boyfriend, who, over the years, became her husband. She would tell Cécile about his romantic side, which she loved, and some quirks she did not, then spoke about her children, year after year. Since Cécile's movement became restricted to the wheelchair and Élizabeth retired, Cécile no longer went

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on walks in the hospital park. She simply sat by the window consumed in her madness and memories.

Élizabeth was no longer there to make her happy. She screamed as she threw herself onto the floor from her chair whenever they crossed the hallway heading to the elevator. The staff tried to take her outside, but she refused and often threw quite a stir. None of the nurses tried after a while, so she just sat by the window, waiting for Élizabeth. It was a different Élizabeth she was so desperately hoping for, unlike everyone in the hospital thought.

The truth behind Élizabeth's lack of visit was quite sinister and dark. Élizabeth had died, but Cécile could not remember from one day to the next, so she held onto her hopes or false memories. Nobody knew. She lived every day believing that Élizabeth would come to visit her one day.

Cécile had turned eighty-one years old a few weeks ago, but her mind faded long before her thirtieth birthday. The nurses often left Cécile by the barred window of her room that had seen curtains at some point but was utterly bare now. These bars caged the patients at society's will, and they were constantly reminded that freedom is only a word in a crossword puzzle.

Cécile sat in her chair motionless and watched the seasons change while her fellow patients played games, watched television, or did crafts in the dayroom next to her. To most people, it would look like she was looking out of the window from her second-floor room, admiring the garden beneath her, but the truth was that she kept staring into the oblivion of her mind.

Cécile had been severely sedated at the beginning. She was violent to the male staff and even stabbed one of the nurses with a pair of scissors a week after she was admitted. She could not handle her locked doors and was preparing to die every night when staff put her to bed. As she grew older and nurse Élizabéth tended to her, the outbursts became less frequent and nonviolent. Now she was the bride of her delirious mind.

Cécile Eisner was transferred from another hospital, the *Hôtel-Dieu*, fifty-four years ago, in 1945. The doctors and nurses only knew that Cécile was found extremely thin and barely alive when she was first seen in Auschwitz on 27 January 1945. Soviet soldiers discovered her lying atop a pile of bodies, starved and tortured.

The number 23871 tattooed on her left arm permanently labeled her a victim of the Holocaust. No amount of scratching helped erase that number and the nightmare carved into the root of her memory by the Nazi tyranny. Since then, she has spent her days waiting for the arrival of someone. No one knew whether the person she had waited for was still alive or if she waited for the end to come and take the pain away.



One part of Paris held such despair, recalling the time of the Nazis overtaking Paris, while the other held the promise of

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hopes and new dreams. Where one waited to meet their end, the other could not wait for their new beginning.

Héni was a photographer, a young man in his early thirties. He was finally making his dreams come true, as he had become able to own his dream studio. He now owned all three neighboring apartments the city was selling, with windows facing the street on the fourth, the top floor of *7 Rue de Tlemcen*, in the twentieth district, just a minute's walk from the famous *Père Lachaise*.

Héni was excited to be next to Paris's largest and most visited cemetery, which possessed a great collection of deceased talents. Moliere, Chopin, Jim Morrison, Oscar Wilde, Edith Piaf and hundreds more. The graveyard was peaceful, timeless, and offered serenity to anyone who wished to escape the everyday chaos or just needed some quiet from the constant thrum of the city.

Some visitors admired the masonry work of headstones and chapels honoring the dead as they sat on many of the cemetery's benches. Some wandered aimlessly among them like a soul who could not pay Charon for the trip across the river Styx.

Héni often walked the cobblestone alleys for hours, taking photos of the sculptures. He believed he gave them personalities through his lens. The sculptures had different expressions and feelings depending on the day or the season. They told the life of the person they were watching over. Their youth on an early summer morning, their sorrows on a rainy afternoon, and their death on an eerie foggy night in late November. But he did not only come

here to find subjects for his next photography book. No, Henri found solace in the cemetery. He was looking for wisdom from the deceased to give meaning to his life.

Henri felt like he had died when his fiancée of nearly six years left him.

“You must have seen this coming, Henri,” his friends told him, almost sounding accusatory, but he did not see his relationship ending. The woman he loved leaving and exiting his life hit him like a train. There were no sobbing break-up talks—no desperate late-night phone calls and no letters were waiting for him in the flat they shared. It was silence and emptiness on that cold winter night Natalie left about a year ago.

Henri lost his way and gradually became a recluse. He has not taken any photographs since that night, but either sat in the dark flat pondering or walked the cemetery aimlessly for hours. The police even detained him for trespassing after he jumped the fence of the *Père Lachaise* at night, listening to love ballads by his favorite singers’ tombs and waiting for the sun to rise and bring light to his broken heart. But the light never came.

His mother, Frances, could not see her only son waste away, so she threw a lifeline by purchasing these apartments. Refocusing on his work helped for the time being, but Henri still felt that Natalie took his purpose in life—the very fabric of his being—with her in her suitcase.

Henri found the neighborhood perfect for his new studio and was grateful for his mother, although he still very much was in denial about needing help. As much as he was very

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tempted, he did not want to move to *Montmartre*, where some of his friends had studios, for two reasons: he liked being close to this cemetery and could afford his current area.

Héni had friends who shared rooms in *Montmartre*, a vibrant and famous part of the 18th district, but they paid hefty rents: quite the opposite from the time when Renoir, Monet, or Van Gogh called it home. Then, the rent was low, and creativity ran high on absinthe, producing masterpieces and green-fairy delirium. A few months ago, he may have made a different choice. He related more to the great masters of the past than he did to anyone living. *Montmartre* would have seemed perfect.

While Natalie was still in his life, Héni had a good and steady income from selling his photography books and doing wedding photos on the weekends. But settling down in *Montmartre* was neither financially feasible when the love birds were looking for a place together nor something that he wants to do now despite his friends' nagging.

The city district once owned the apartments he is now renovating, and because these spaces needed a lot of upgrades, the city sold them well under market price. They kept them on their books but always had more pressing issues they spent their budget on other than fixing them. Finally, after being empty for a decade, the city decided to sell them and get rid of the liabilities, which is the only reason Héni could afford them, with financial help from his widowed mother. It was a solution where everyone benefitted.

Now, with weeks into construction, his dreams were in motion. The crew knocked out the main walls separating the three apartments, and they looked like a truck drove through them. There were huge holes in the middle of each one, and piles of bricks were scattered around the floor. Before the crew could continue, the architect needed to inspect the remaining structure's stability to ensure the walls would hold.

The vision was to open all three apartments into one big room and create two smaller bedrooms. It was an open concept, a rather unconventional layout, but spacious. Converting the flats into a studio was not a small task, and *Hé*nnri learned about this relatively late in the construction process. It was running late and over budget. Everything had to be stripped down to bricks and rebuilt from bare-bones—challenging work. The apartment dwellers may have stayed in these units for years but never treated them as their own homes. They were only a temporary roof over their heads while they completed their assignment for the municipality; then, they moved on.

“*Monsieur Hé*nnri. Come, come. Look what we found,” the crew supervisor waved him over as he pulled out a small package from a hole in the floor. It was a dirty and mold-covered cloth that seemed to have been hidden.

“What is it?” *Hé*nnri asked, with a frown on his forehead and his jet-black eyes staring at the foreign object. Most people in Paris always turned their heads to stare at the handsome, tall man who styled his black hair back into a ponytail. His Mediterranean features made him look

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intoxicating, which he inherited from his Greek mother, who met H nri’s father while she was studying at *Sorbonne* as a foreign exchange student. He was a “sight for sore eyes,” as his mother often joked to her friends.

“Why are you bringing this to me?” H nri asked after he looked at the dirty cloth, “Just throw it away.”

“We found it under the floorboard. You should at least see what it is, and it might be worth money,” the bald crew supervisor, Jakov, said with a comical look and heavy Croatian accent.

H nri hesitated to take it from him, but the supervisor nudged him, and H nri took the rag. He held his breath and slowly untied the twine that secured the cloth. It was an old and battered journal.

“Hmm, it has surely seen better days,” murmured H nri, slightly disappointed. Maybe he was expecting something valuable after Jakov insisted. He ran his thumb through the yellow-stained pages, dust flying everywhere around it. Some pages were torn out, and some were ripped in half, but most were readable.

The journal had a dark leather cover, worn and shiny, but the original color was unidentifiable. H nri put the journal back into the rag and slid it into his shoulder bag, thinking he would look at it later after he got home. He had more important things to do at that moment.

After his work was done, H nri rode his bicycle from his soon-to-be new studio to his current rental flat. His temporary home was in the 18th district at 21 Rue

Cave, one block away from the Roman Catholic Church, *Saint-Bernard-de-la-Chapelle*.

Héni cruised along the boulevard on this sunny but cool late autumn afternoon. He was smiling, pondering when he would be able to move in, probably within a couple of months, despite the delays. Construction was the only thing on his mind on his way back home. He was impatient and wanted the work finished, but he also wanted it done right. He was aware that making the crew hurry would be a bad idea.

Héni did not even think about the journal until he came to his apartment block and looked for his gate keys in his bag. His hand brushed against the cold, damp rag as he dug into his pocket and ruffled through papers, but he did not heed it. He hung his bicycle on a prominent hook on the wall between his neighbor's and his door. Héni's apartment was the closest to the staircase, so it was a good compromise—much better than blocking the hallway with his ride.

Héni opened his apartment door and tossed his bag on the kitchen counter. He took off his hat, scarf, and jacket and hung them on the back of the front door.

Héni's current rental was small but habitable. While he shared it with Natalie, it was vibrant and alive, but now it was more of a shelter than a home. Frances begged his son to move and leave the memories behind, but for Héni, that is all he had, and he was unwilling to let go of those memories.

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The flat was livable, maybe a little chaotic, with scattered lenses, shades, and tripods covering the floor. Hénri's black and white images covered the living room walls. He used to work exclusively with portraits, massive pictures of Natalie were on prime display all over the tiny flat. But after she left, capturing old cemeteries and architecture eased his pain. He did not want to see life through his lens. That is how Hénri experienced time. Life before and after Natalie.

A red couch dominated the living room, and its size demanded attention. Not much else fit into the room except a small computer table. Hénri piled his books and photo magazines on the floor so they reached different heights like organ pipes.

"Alice, I'm home!" Hénri said in a sing-song voice as he always did. Alice came to greet him and swirled around his ankles, meowing for some dinner. Alice, a Russian blue cat with green eyes, was his only companion now. After Natalie left, his mother gave her to him after she failed to convince him to move.

"It's good to have someone waiting for you when you come home," she had said caringly.

"What am I going to do with a cat?" Hénri asked, slightly annoyed at the seemingly random gift, but Frances knew that she needed to divert her son's attention from dwelling on his misery.

"Take her," she said with a sigh, "she needs you." And as it happened, he grew quite fond of this dominating feline.

Hénri's mother was an opinionated and strong woman, like most females in his life, even Alice, and raised Hénri

to accept that women are far from weak and helpless creatures.

Frances adored Natalie. She had the brain, the heart, and the soul and followed her dreams of helping women as an obstetrician/gynecologist in Congo, working for *Médecins Sans Frontière*, Doctors Without Borders, an NGO, while she finished her residency. Hénri was not ready to go to Africa, and Natalie was not willing to stay in Paris. Still, Hénri stuck his head in the sand, and he did not see her slowly drifting away until the day she packed and left without a note.

Frances saw her young self in her, and, as much as it broke her motherly heart, she could not blame Natalie for following her passion—something she would never tell Hénri, ever.

Hénri fed Alice, who was continuously bugging him for dinner and some well-overdue attention, then poured himself a glass of wine. He preferred red over white and liked Pinot Noir best of the variety of excellent French wines. It was plain yet delicate, rarely blended with others, and a great type.

Hénri grabbed his bag, sat on the couch, and reached for the phone to call his mother. As the phone rang, he opened his satchel and took out the journal wrapped in the old, smelly rag.

“Hi, Mom,” Hénri greeted his mother.

“Hénri, how’s construction?” she asked immediately.

Hénri and his mom had grown closer since his dad died from a massive heart attack a few years back. Hénri begged