Body Double

Tess Gerritsen

ONE

Pesez le matin que vous n'irez peut-ętre pas jusqu'au soir,
Et au soir que vous n'irez peut-ętre pas jusqu'au matin.
Be aware every morning that you may not last the day,
And every evening that you may not last the night.

-ENGRAVED PLAQUE IN THE CATACOMBS OF PARIS

A ROW OF SKULLS glared from atop a wall of intricately stacked femurs and tibias. Though it was June, and she knew the sun was shining on the streets of Paris sixty feet above her, Dr. Maura Isles felt chilled as she walked down the dim passageway, its walls lined almost to the ceiling with human remains. She was familiar, even intimate, with death, and had confronted its face countless times on her autopsy table, but she was stunned by the scale of this display, by the sheer number of bones stored in this network of tunnels beneath the City of Light. The one-kilometer tour took her through only a small section of the catacombs. Off-limits to tourists were numerous side tunnels and bone-filled chambers, their dark mouths gaping seductively behind locked gates. Here were the remains of six million Parisians who had once felt the sun on their faces, who had hungered and thirsted and loved, who had felt the beating of their own hearts in their chests, the rush of air in and out of their lungs. They could never have imagined that one day their bones would be unearthed from their cemetery resting places, and moved to this grim ossuary beneath the city.

That one day they would be on display, to be gawked at by hordes of tourists.

A century and a half ago, to make room for the steady influx of dead into Paris's overcrowded cemeteries, the bones had been disinterred and moved into the vast honeycomb of ancient limestone quarries that lay deep beneath the city. The workmen who'd transferred the bones had not carelessly tossed them into piles, but had performed their macabre task with flair, meticulously stacking them to form whimsical designs. Like fussy stonemasons, they had built high walls decorated with alternating layers of skulls and long bones, turning decay into an artistic statement. And they had hung plaques engraved with grim quotations, reminders to all who walked these passageways that Death spares no one.

One of the plaques caught Maura's eye, and she paused among the flow of tourists to read it. As she struggled to translate the words using her shaky high school French, she heard the incongruous sound of children's laughter echoing in the dim corridors, and the twang of a man's Texas accent as he muttered to his wife. "Can you believe this place, Sherry? Gives me the goddamn creeps . . ."

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The Texas couple moved on, their voices fading into silence. For a moment Maura was alone in the chamber, breathing in the dust of the centuries. Under the dim glow of the tunnel light, mold had flourished on a cluster of skulls, coating them in a greenish cast. A single bullet hole gaped in the forehead of one skull, like a third eye.

I know how you died.

The chill of the tunnel had seeped into her own bones. But she did not move, determined to translate that plaque, to quell her horror by engaging in a useless intellectual puzzle. Come on, Maura. Three years of high school French, and you can't figure this out? It was a personal challenge now, all thoughts of mortality temporarily held at bay. Then the words took on meaning, and she felt her blood go cold . . .

Happy is he who is forever faced with the hour of his death
And prepares himself for the end every day.

Suddenly she noticed the silence. No voices, no echoing footsteps. She turned and left that gloomy chamber. How had she fallen so far behind the other tourists? She was alone in this tunnel, alone with the dead. She thought about unexpected power outages, about wandering the wrong way in pitch darkness. She'd heard of Parisian workmen a century ago who had lost their way in the cata- combs and died of starvation. Her pace quickened as she sought to catch up with the others, to rejoin the company of the living. She felt Death pressing in too closely in these tunnels. The skulls seemed to stare back at her with resentment, a chorus of six million berating her for her ghoulish curiosity.

We were once as alive as you are. Do you think you can escape the future you see here?

When at last she emerged from the catacombs and stepped into the sunshine on Rue Remy Dumoncel, she took in deep breaths of air. For once she welcomed the noise of traffic, the press of the crowd, as if she had just been granted a second chance at life. The colors seemed brighter, the faces friendlier. My last day in Paris, she thought, and only now do I really appreciate the beauty of this city. She had spent most of the past week trapped in meeting rooms, attending the International Conference of Forensic Pathology. There had been so little time for sightseeing, and even the tours arranged by the conference organizers had been related to death and illness: the medical museum, the old surgical theater.

The catacombs.

Of all the memories to bring back from Paris, how ironic that her most vivid one would be of human remains. That's not healthy, she thought as she sat at an outdoor café, savoring one last cup of espresso and a strawberry tart. In two days, I'll be back in my autopsy room, surrounded by stainless steel, shut off from sunlight. Breathing only the cold, filtered air flowing from the vents. This day will seem like a memory of paradise.

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She took her time, recording those memories. The smell of coffee, the taste of buttery pastry. The natty businessmen with cell phones pressed to their ears, the intricate knots of the scarves fluttering around women's throats. She entertained the fantasy that surely danced in the head of every American who had ever visited Paris: What would it be like to miss my plane? To just linger here, in this café, in this glorious city, for the rest of my life?

But in the end, she rose from her table and hailed a taxi to the airport. In the end she walked away from the fantasy, from Paris, but only because she promised herself she would someday return. She just didn't know when.

Her flight home was delayed three hours. That's three hours I could have spent walking along the Seine, she thought as she sat disgruntled in Charles de Gaulle. Three hours I could have wandered the Marais or poked around in Les Halles. Instead she was trapped in an airport so crowded with travelers she could find no place to sit. By the time she finally boarded the Air France jet, she was tired and thoroughly cranky. One glass of wine with the inflight meal was all it took for her to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Only as the plane began its descent into Boston did she awaken. Her head ached, and the setting sun glared in her eyes. The headache intensified as she stood in baggage claim, watching suitcase after suitcase, none of them hers, slide down the ramp. It grew to a relentless pounding as she later waited in line to file a claim for her missing luggage. By the time she finally stepped into a taxi with only her carry-on bag, darkness had fallen, and she wanted nothing more than a hot bath and a hefty dose of Advil. She sank back in the taxi and once again drifted off to sleep.

The sudden braking of the vehicle awakened her.

"What's going on here?" she heard the driver say.

Stirring, she gazed through bleary eyes at flashing blue lights. It took a moment for her to register what she was looking at. Then she realized that they had turned onto the street where she lived, and she sat up, instantly alert, alarmed by what she saw. Four Brookline police cruisers were parked, their roof lights slicing through the darkness.

"Looks like some kind of emergency going on," the driver said. "This is your street, right?"

"And that's my house right down there. Middle of the block."

"Where all the police cars are? I don't think they're gonna let us through."

As if to confirm the taxi driver's words, a patrolman approached, waving at them to turn around.

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The cabbie stuck his head out the window. "I got a passenger here I need to drop off. She lives on this street."

"Sorry, bud. This whole block's cordoned off."

Maura leaned forward and said to the driver, "Look, I'll just get out here." She handed him the fare, grabbed her carry-on bag, and stepped out of the taxi. Only moments before, she'd felt dull and groggy; now the warm June night itself seemed electric with tension. She started up the sidewalk, her sense of anxiety growing as she drew closer to the gathering of bystanders, as she saw all the official vehicles parked in front of her house. Had something happened to one of her neighbors? A host of terrible possibilities passed through her mind. Suicide. Homicide. She thought of Mr. Telushkin, the unmarried robotics engineer who lived next door. Hadn't he seemed particularly melancholy when she'd last seen him? She thought, too, of Lily and Susan, her neighbors on the other side, two lesbian attorneys whose gay rights activism made them high-profile targets. Then she spotted Lily and Susan standing at the edge of the crowd, both of them very much alive, and her concern flew back to Mr. Telushkin, whom she did not see among the onlookers.

Lily glanced sideways and saw Maura approaching. She did not wave but just stared at her, wordless, and gave Susan a sharp nudge. Susan turned to look at Maura, and her jaw dropped open. Now other neighbors were turning to stare as well, all their faces registering astonishment.

Why are they looking at me? Maura wondered. What have I done?

"Dr. Isles?" A Brookline patrolman stood gaping at her. "It is- it is you, isn't it?" he asked.

Well, that was a stupid question, she thought. "That's my house, there. What's going on, officer?"

The patrolman huffed out a sharp breath. "Um-I think you'd better come with me."

He took her by the arm and led her through the crowd. Her neighbors solemnly parted before her, as though making way for a condemned prisoner. Their silence was eerie; the only sound was the crackle of police radios. They reached a barrier of yellow police tape, strung between stakes, several of them pounded into Mr. Telushkin's front yard. He's proud of his lawn and he's not going to be happy about that, was her immediate and utterly inane thought. The patrolman lifted the tape and she ducked under it, crossing into what she now realized was a crime scene.

She knew it was a crime scene because she spotted a familiar figure standing at the center of it. Even from across the lawn, Maura could recognize homicide detective Jane Rizzoli. Now eight months pregnant, the petite Rizzoli looked like a ripe pear in a pantsuit. Her presence was yet another bewildering detail. What was a Boston detective doing here in Brookline, outside her usual jurisdiction? Rizzoli did not see Maura approaching; her gaze was fixed instead on a car parked at the curb in front of

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Mr. Telushkin's house. She was shaking her head, clearly upset, her dark curls springing out in their usual disarray.

It was Rizzoli's partner, Detective Barry Frost, who spotted Maura first. He glanced at her, glanced away, and then did a sudden double take, his pale face whipping back to stare at her. Word- lessly he tugged on his partner's arm.

Rizzoli went absolutely still, the strobelike flashes of blue cruiser lights illuminating her expression of disbelief. She began to walk, as though in a trance, toward Maura.

"Doc?" Rizzoli said softly. "Is that you?"

"Who else would it be? Why does everyone keep asking me that? Why do you all look at me as though I'm a ghost?"

"Because . . ." Rizzoli stopped. Gave a shake of her head, tossing unkempt curls. "Jesus. I thought for a minute you were a ghost."

"What?"

Rizzoli turned and called out: "Father Brophy?"

Maura had not seen the priest standing off by himself at the periphery. Now he emerged from the shadows, his collar a slash of white across his neck. His usually handsome face looked gaunt, his expression shell-shocked. Why is Daniel here? Priests were not usually called to crime scenes unless a victim's family requested counsel. Her neighbor Mr. Telushkin was not Catholic, but Jewish. He would have no reason to request a priest.

"Could you please take her into the house, Father?" Rizzoli said.

Maura asked: "Is anyone going to tell me what's going on?"

"Go inside, Doc. Please. We'll explain later."

Maura felt Brophy's arm slip around her waist, his firm grasp clearly communicating that this was not the time for her to resist. That she should simply obey the detective's request. She allowed him to guide her to her front door, and she registered the secret thrill of the close contact between them, the warmth of his body pressed against hers. She was so aware of him standing beside her that her hands were clumsy as she inserted the key into her front door. Though they had been friends for months, she had never before invited Daniel Brophy into her house, and her reaction to him now was a reminder of why she had so carefully maintained a distance between them. They stepped inside, into a living room where the lamps were already on, lit by automatic timers. She paused for a moment near the couch, uncertain of what to do next.

It was Father Brophy who took command.

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"Sit down," he said, pointing her to the couch. "I'll get you something to drink."

"You're the guest in my house. I should be offering you the drink," she said.

"Not under the circumstances."

"I don't even know what the circumstances are."

"Detective Rizzoli will tell you." He left the room and came back with a glass of water-not exactly her beverage of choice at that moment, but then, it didn't seem appropriate to ask a priest to fetch the bottle of vodka. She sipped the water, feeling uneasy under his gaze. He sank into the chair across from her, watching her as though afraid she might vanish.

At last she heard Rizzoli and Frost come into the house, heard them murmuring in the foyer to a third person, a voice Maura didn't recognize. Secrets, she thought. Why is everyone keeping secrets from me? What don't they want me to know?

She looked up as the two detectives walked into the living room. With them was a man who introduced himself as Brookline Detective Eckert, a name she'd probably forget within five minutes. Her attention was completely focused on Rizzoli, with whom she had worked before. A woman she both liked and respected.

The detectives all settled into chairs, Rizzoli and Frost facing Maura across the coffee table. She felt outnumbered, four to one, everyone's gazes on her. Frost pulled out his notepad and pen. Why was he taking notes? Why did this feel like the start of an interrogation?

"How are you doing, Doc?" Rizzoli asked, her voice soft with concern.

Maura laughed at the trite question. "I'd be doing a lot better if I knew what was going on."

"Can I ask you where you've been tonight?"

"I just got home from the airport."

"Why were you at the airport?"

"I flew in from Paris. From Charles de Gaulle. It was a long flight, and I'm not in the mood for twenty questions."

"How long were you in Paris?"

"A week. I flew there last Wednesday." Maura thought she detected a note of accusation in Rizzoli's brusque questions, and her irritation was now building toward anger. "If you don't believe me, you can ask my secretary, Louise. She's the one who booked the flight for me. I was there for a meeting-"

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"The International Conference of Forensic Pathology. Is that correct?"

Maura was taken aback. "You already know?"

"Louise told us."

They've been asking questions about me. Even before I got home, they were talking to my secretary.

"She told us your plane was supposed to land at five P.M. at Logan," said Rizzoli. "It's now nearly ten o'clock. Where've you been?"

"We had a late departure from Charles de Gaulle. Something about extra security checks. The airlines are so paranoid, we were lucky just to get off the ground three hours late."

"So your departure was three hours delayed."

"I just told you that."

"What time did you land?"

"I don't know. About eight thirty."

"It took you an hour and a half to get home from Logan?"

"My suitcase didn't show up. I had to file a claims form with Air France." Maura stopped, suddenly at her limit. "Look, god- damn it, what is this all about? Before I answer any more questions, I have a right to know. Are you accusing me of something?"

"No, Doc. We're not accusing you of anything. We're just trying to figure out the time frame."

"Time frame for what?"

Frost said, "Have you received any threats, Dr. Isles?"

She looked at him in bewilderment. "What?"

"Do you know anyone who might have reason to hurt you?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

Maura gave a frustrated laugh. "Well, is anyone ever sure?"

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"You must have had a few cases in court where your testimony pissed off someone," said Rizzoli.

"Only if they're pissed off by the truth."

"You've made enemies in court. Perps you've helped convict."

"I'm sure you have too, Jane. Just by doing your job."

"Have you received any specific threats? Any letters or phone calls?"

"My phone number's unlisted. And Louise never gives out my address."

"What about letters sent to you at the medical examiner's office?"

"There's been the occasional weird letter. We all get them."

"Weird?"

"People writing about space aliens or conspiracies. Or accusing us of trying to cover up the truth about an autopsy. We just put those letters in the screwball file. Unless there's an overt threat, in which case we refer it to the police."

Maura saw Frost scribble in his notebook, and she wondered what he had written. By now she was so angry, she wanted to reach across the coffee table and snatch the notebook out of his hands.

"Doc," said Rizzoli quietly, "do you have a sister?"

The question, so out of the blue, startled Maura and she stared at Rizzoli, her irritation suddenly forgotten. "Excuse me?"

"Do you have a sister?"

"Why are you asking that?"

"I just need to know."

Maura released a sharp breath. "No, I don't have a sister. And you know that I'm adopted. When the hell are you going to tell me what this is all about?"

Rizzoli and Frost looked at each other.

Frost closed his notebook. "I guess it's time to show her."

Rizzoli led the way to the front door. Maura stepped outside, into a warm summer night that was lit up like a garish carnival by the flashing lights from the cruisers. Her body was still functioning on Paris time, where it was now four A .M., and she saw everything through a haze of exhaustion, the night as surreal as a bad dream.

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The instant she emerged from her house, all faces turned to stare at her. She saw her neighbors gathered across the street, watching her across the crime scene tape. As medical examiner, she was accustomed to being in the public eye, her every move followed by both police and media, but tonight the attention was somehow different. More intrusive, even frightening. She was glad to have Rizzoli and Frost flanking her, as though to shield her from curious eyes as they moved down the sidewalk, toward the dark Ford Taurus parked at the curb in front of Mr. Telushkin's house.

Maura did not recognize the car, but she did recognize the bearded man standing beside it, his thick hands gloved in latex. It was Dr. Abe Bristol, her colleague from the M.E.'s office. Abe was a man of hearty appetites, and his girth reflected his love of rich foods, his belly spilling over his belt in flabby excess. He stared at Maura and said, "Christ, it's uncanny. Could've fooled me." He nodded toward the car. "I hope you're ready for this, Maura."

Ready for what?

She looked at the parked Taurus. Saw, backlit by the flashing lights, the silhouette of a figure slumped over the steering wheel. Black splatters obscured the windshield. Blood.

Rizzoli shone her flashlight on the passenger door. At first, Maura did not understand what she was supposed to be looking at; her attention was still focused on the blood-spattered window, and the shadowy occupant in the driver's seat. Then she saw what Rizzoli's Maglite beam was shining on. Just below the door handle were three parallel scratches, carved deep into the car's finish.

"Like a claw mark," said Rizzoli, curling her fingers as though to trace the scar.

Maura stared at the marks. Not a claw, she thought as a chill ran up her back. A raptor's talon.

"Come around to the driver's side," said Rizzoli.

Maura asked no questions as she followed Rizzoli around the rear of the Taurus.

"Massachusetts license plate," Rizzoli said, her flashlight beam sweeping across the rear bumper, but it was just a detail mentioned in passing; Rizzoli continued around to the driver's side of the car. There she paused and looked at Maura.

"This is what got us all so shook up," she said. She aimed her flashlight into the car.

The beam fell squarely on the woman's face, which stared toward the window. Her right cheek rested against the steering wheel; her eyes were open.

Maura could not speak. She gaped at the ivory skin, the black hair, the full lips, slightly parted, as though in surprise. She reeled backward, her limbs suddenly boneless, and she had the dizzying sense that she was floating away, her body no

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longer anchored to the earth. A hand grasped her arm, steadying her. It was Father Brophy, standing right behind her. She had not even noticed he was there.

Now she understood why everyone had been so stunned by her arrival. She stared at the corpse in the car, at the face illuminated by Rizzoli's flashlight beam.

It's me. That woman is me.

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