

Eternity



Emile took off his glasses, careful not to disturb the parchment scrap in front of him, and rubbed his eyes. Time for a break. He pushed the chair back from his desk. It was late. The others had gone. The security guard would be coming round in a little while.

He decided to make himself a cup of tea. That would lift the mood. He opened his office door and shuffled down the worn wood floor, grimacing at the pain in his lower back where a cramp was edging northward. He should know better than to strain his back this way. Sixty-eight years and the bullet still taunted him, never letting him forget it was there. As if he could forget the night he told Sybille he loved her. In the last days of the war all those years ago.

He put some water in the kettle and plugged it in. There was a contraption that dispensed hot and cold water, but Emile was a purist about tea and wanted the water boiling. Years ago the museum allocated the electric tea kettle and it held pride of place for him in the small kitchen that the archeologists and curators used. Squeezing any resource out of anyone was a feat in his field. He smiled and pulled from his pocket the small tin where he stored his Koshary tea and plastic wrapped mint leaves. He preferred this tea, slightly sweetened with a little milk, in the evenings or when trying to relax. Saiidi was too strong the way it was brewed to pitch black and sweetened with large amounts of sugar. Use to be his gut could take that when he was in Egypt on excavations, but no longer. How he loved those times at the site. Even today he could smell the desert, the peculiar scent of dry heat mingled with sand and dust and the ancient emanations from whatever they uncovered. He could feel the fine grains of sand as they lightly scraped across his face when the wind was a gentle breeze and not the vortex of air that felled everything in its path. Feel his dust-caked hands

methodically brushing dirt away from a shard of inscribed pottery and his growing excitement as the image of figures snaking around the reddish brown clay emerged....

The kettle whistled, breaking into his thoughts. He was getting lost in his own head more and more of late. Must be the date coming up of Sybille's birthdate. No, no, it was the day she died. Yes, that was it. The day she died so many years ago. Or was it that long ago? His mind telescoped sometimes, with the past obscured in a fog of memories. Other times, it seemed only like looking in the rear view mirror, the events revived by a mere turn of the head.

He heard footsteps turning the corner.

"Oh, hello, Dr. Becotte," Stan said genially as he stopped in the doorway. "I thought I saw the lights on up here. How ya' doing?" Stan nearly filled the doorway with his large frame. His uniform was slightly splayed open at the button line and his face was splotched from the exertion of climbing the back stairs.

"I'm fine, Stan. Just translating a last piece of parchment. Wanted to finish it before I left tomorrow to spend some time with my daughter and her family upstate."

Stan flashed a wide smile. "No problem. You archeologists are a breed of your own. I'm accustomed to your ways."

Emile chuckled. "We're not that bad. And don't judge all my colleagues by my strange patterns."

"I'm foolin' with you, Doc," laughed Stan. "Well, let me finish my rounds. Don't stay too late. It's nearly eight o'clock. Get home for dinner."

"I will. Thanks, Stan," replied Emile.

Stan retreated down the corridor. Emile could hear him rattling the doorknobs to check that the offices were secure. A final bang of the stairwell door and silence returned.

Emile sprinkled a teaspoon of tea in his cup along with a little mint and poured the water in. He watched the water infuse into a delicate shade of brown.

"Emile, drink this. You'll feel better."

Emile opened his eyes and saw a young woman with cropped black hair. Her eyes were a deep green and freckles spilled across her nose and cheeks. "Emile, it's me. Sybille."

Emile felt as if he were coming out of a deep trance. He tried to sit up in bed, but pain seared through his lower back. "Where am I?" he said when the pain eased.

"In the hospital. You've been unconscious for five days. Do you remember being shot? You were lucky it was a block away from the hospital. Henri and Etienne carried you here."

Emile scrutinized her face. Of course. Sybille. A Jewish girl who escaped the deportations and joined the resistance. She stumbled upon their cell after her comrades were arrested. They went on missions together. But there was something else. What was it?

"What happened?"

“We were moving to another location. We were warned that someone turned us in. The Nazis pulled up just as we were coming down the steps. We all ran in different directions. Henri, Etienne, you and I ended up crawling into a sewer and finding our way to this area of the city. As we were climbing out of the sewer, a soldier saw us. Had he not been so drunk he might have shot all of us. He was pulling his revolver out and it discharged. Being the unlucky sot that you are, a bullet hit you in the back.”

Emile was watching the way her mouth moved, but her voice seemed a few seconds behind. Like a movie soundtrack that didn't synchronize. Some memory was trying to punch through the mist.

“The doctors decided not to operate. They were afraid they'd damage your spine. The bullet is just beneath the surface. They said you should be fine, although you did get some kind of infection they've been treating. You've had a high fever.”

Emile's mind was spinning, as was the room. Tilt, tilt. He tried to position his head, but a wave of nausea overtook him. “We have to leave. When can I get out of here?”

“No need, my love. The war is over. The Germans have surrendered. Paris is swarming with Americans and the last of the Germans are surrendering or trying to escape. It's a madhouse out there.”

Emile wanted to ask her something. But what? And why did she say “my love”? He opened his mouth to speak but suddenly, his hand was burning.

“Ouch!” Emile realized he had been holding the hot cup in his hands. He put the cup on the counter, and looked about. He shook his head trying to clear the lingering cobwebs from his mind.

He picked up his cup, careful that the handle was cool enough, and returned to his desk. Damn, this was happening too much. Time slippage, like the beads Kurt Vonnegut talked about in *Sirens of Titan*. Each memory as a bead, separate in time, good and bad, strung together on a gossamer thread. One disjointed memory here, one there.

He put the cup on a side table. Would be a disaster if anything happened to the papyrus fragment. He sat down and reached for the magnifying glass. The characters leapt up as he moved the glass over the lines of writing.

Your love pours over me

Filling me with your beauty and joy

His pen scratched out the words as he spoke. Egyptian, probably 1,500 BCE, maybe older. Reference to sister or brother typically connoting close intimacy between lovers. Not siblings.

“Emile, tell me again how you love me.”

Emile smiled at Sybille as she lay in his arms. She asked him that a lot. He touched her face, tracing one of the lines across the thin parchment of skin. He remembered the formation of that topography. Year by year etched into her face. Maybe the loss of her entire family in the camps made her assume a vulnerability that she never could discard. But to him, it always sounded like a refrain from a song. Because it was a duet

of course. As the Egyptian poetry he studied, the alternating stanzas, the contrapuntal notes. They both knew what his answer would be.

“Your love pours over me, filling me with your beauty and joy.”

“What?” Emile startled himself and pitched backward, slamming into the back of the chair. He thought he must have dozed off. He got up slowly out of his chair and smoothed his hair back. Everything was as it had been. He caught his reflection in the cabinet glass. An old man returned his gaze. It always surprised him, even after all these years, that he was indeed old. He didn’t feel the way he looked in his reflection. Moments seemed like yesterday. Like swimming in the lake near Arles where his family had a summer home. Or how proud he was when he became an archeologist. His first trek to Egypt on a dig outside Memphis. And how it felt to kiss Sybille for the first time.

He returned to the parchment and took up his pen. Under the magnifying glass the ancient characters again leapt up through the encircling glass. He mouthed the words as he wrote:

Our lips touch,

As the flow of the Nile

My love overwhelms the banks

It was dark that night. Sybille and he had been scouting a Nazi weapons armory. They had been working together a few months now, living in close quarters with the other resisters. Emile had tried to tamp down his growing feelings for her. It was the war. It was the isolation. It was dangerous and could compromise the group. It could have been so many things he could think of that doomed any affair with another resister. And so he kept his feelings secreted deep inside.

They skirted a small park. A sound startled them and they took refuge under a foot bridge. The splashing of water played an incongruous melody to their labored breathing. They waited. A loud noise made them involuntarily draw closer. A deer crashed through the brush, arced over a fallen limb and disappeared into the inky blackness.

Emile caught sight of the moon’s reflection in a small splash on the side of Sybille’s face, and realized he may never kiss a woman again. All could be ended in one brief flash of a gun. The smell of his own death in the pungency of gunpowder. He drew Sybille close to him. She didn’t pull away but raised her face. In the half-light he found her lips.

Our lips touch,

As the flow of the Nile

My love overwhelms the banks

Emile felt that familiar surge of joy in his chest. His eyes were closed while the memory washed over him. But the air, as usual, soon grew cold, and he knew reality was just beyond the rise of his lidded eyes.

He sat back down at his desk. Strange how being eighty-six years of age didn’t mean anything anymore. He could still recall the feeling of his youthful body, sinewy and strong and moving however he

wanted. How it felt to race across a beach and heave himself against a breaking wave, or furiously pump his bicycle over the heavy cobblestones of a Paris street. He looked down at his hand and the veins that pushed through his mottled flesh. He could recall it all. The memory of muscle, now only a memory of abstraction, not of real sinew and muscle and bone that still could be commanded at will.

He raised his arms and hugged the still air. Here was the circumference that he remembered so well. How his arms would wrap around Sybille. He could still remember her dimensions.

He sighed and gazed at the parchment slip. The writing was swimming on the page, fluid and wavy. He touched the top of his head for his glasses, and not finding them there, realized he was wearing them. A wet rivulet fell down his cheek and he brushed it away, annoyed. Stop this. Finish the work. Do what you always do and return to her. To Egypt. She's your only mistress now. Until you see Sybille again.

"I love the stars. Don't you? Look how they twinkle," whispered Sybille as they sat on the roof of their apartment house. She was pregnant with Jean-Luc, their first. His conception was a miracle of not just human experience, but of the fact that neither could believe they survived the war. Life became full of possibilities once death had been cheated.

"The Egyptians thought that souls became stars. Their quest for eternity was all pervasive," Emile said as he gazed upward.

"Where do you want to be in the heavens?" asked Sybille playfully. She had always teased him about his fascination with Egypt, but through the years had been his unfailingly constant companion, writing her diaries or reading as he excavated, swatting flies away and mopping her brow, unperturbed. Even the birth of their children hadn't stopped her. She couldn't compete with Egypt for his affections. But she knew how to share them.

"Right alongside you," he shot back. A pause. Then both burst into laughter. The depth of their love was always tempered with a certain humor, as if they were embarrassed by its beneficence or superstitious that it would be taken away as punishment for the hubris of their entwined souls.

Emile smiled. "Eternal" is the word that had caught his eye a moment ago. There it was on the parchment.

My love is eternal.

Yes, my darling girl, yes it is. Even fourteen years later. There wasn't a moment since that he imagined the comfort of another companion. In the unraveling of Sybille's neurology as she descended into the irretrievable depths of Alzheimer's, he relived so many events when the loop of her mind played and rewound memory after memory in no particular sequence. As a historian he was used to meticulously ordering the discovery of pieces of human experience to reveal a story, an explanation, an expression of lives past. This was quite the opposite. It was the dismantling of the human core of memory, piece by piece. He found fascination in the process, although he knew it was a coping mechanism that helped blunt the wretched clawing of despair.

He looked at his watch. It was almost nine o'clock. Just a few more lines and he could go. He took his pen in hand and scratched out the last words.

Separation pierces my heart until I hold you again

I long for you

Emile put down his pen and stared at the translation. He felt a keen kinship at this moment with the suffering of a man who had lived thousands of years ago. How beautiful the expression. And it had emerged despite time and geography. Here it lay in front of Emile, drawn from his pen and given life.

Suddenly, he remembered. It had been the single thought that he needed to make the pieces of this evening finally fit together. The first time he told Sybille he loved her. They were running. He remembered the sound of a loud crack, a quick flash and the smell of gunpowder. His legs gave out and he couldn't figure out how to make them move.

"Emile!" Sybille screamed.

He lay on his side, and then felt himself lifted and carried at a run. Sybille was crying and stumbling alongside.

"I love you, Sybille."

"Don't you dare die, Emile," Sybille screamed. "Don't you dare tell me you love me and then die. I swear I will find you in that Egyptian afterlife you always talk about and drag you back. Don't you dare die on me!"

Relief came over Emile. That thought that had been like an itch at the back of his head all night. How he had wanted to laugh at her those many years ago as she threatened his waning life. How determined she was to pull him back from the precipice. How she always made him laugh.

He glanced at the parchment and the words written more than three thousand years ago. "I hope you found her, my friend," he whispered in Arabic.

Emile locked the parchment away in the cabinet, grabbed his coat and turned out the lights. His footsteps echoed down the hall. Tomorrow he would see his daughter and his grandchildren. And soon, he would see Sybille. No more longing or separation. Just the stars ahead of them.