



Part I

# LONDRES





# I

Londres, 1898 (ninety-three years after Trafalgar)

Most people have trouble recalling their first memory, because they have to stretch for it, like trying to touch their toes; but Joe didn't. This was because it was a memory formed a week after his forty-third birthday.

He stepped down off the train. That was it, the very first thing he remembered, but the second was something less straightforward. It was the slow, eerie feeling that everything was doing just what it should be, minding its own business, but that at the same time, it was all wrong.

It was early in the morning, and cursedly cold. Vapour hissed on the black engine right above him. Because the platform was only a couple of inches above the tracks, the double pistons of the tall wheels were level with his waist. He was so close he could hear the water still boiling above the furnace. He stepped well away from it, feeling tight with the certainty it was about to lurch forward.

The train had just come in. The platform was full of people looking slow and stiff from the journey, all moving towards the concourse. The sweet carbon smell of coal smoke was everywhere. Because it was only just light outside, the round electric lamps of the station gave everything a pale glow, and cast long, hazy shadows; even the steam had a shadow, a sort of shy devil just trying to decide whether to be solid or not.

Joe had no idea what he was doing there.





He waited, because railway stations were internationally the same and they were a logical place to get confused, if there was ever a logical place. But nothing came. He couldn't remember coming here, or going anywhere. He looked down at himself. With a writhe of horror, he found he couldn't even remember getting dressed. His clothes were unfamiliar. A heavy coat lined with tartan. A plain waistcoat with interesting buttons, stamped with laurel patterns.

A sign on the wall said that this was platform three. Behind him somewhere on the train, a conductor was going along the carriages, saying the same thing again and again, quiet and respectful, because he was having to wake people up in first class.

'Londres Gare du Roi, all change please, Londres Gare du Roi ...'

Joe wondered why the hell the train company was giving London station names in French, and then wondered helplessly why he'd wondered. All the London station names *were* French. Everyone knew that.

Someone touched his arm and asked in English if he was all right. It made him jump so badly that he twanged the nerve in the back of his skull. White pain shot down his neck.

'Sorry – could you tell me where we are?' he asked, and heard how ridiculous it sounded.

The man didn't seem to think it was extraordinary to find an amnesiac at a railway station. 'London,' he said. 'The Gare du Roi.'

Joe wasn't sure why he'd been hoping for something other than what he'd heard the conductor say. He swallowed and looked away. The steam was clearing. There were signs everywhere; for the Colonial Library, the Musée Britannique, the Métro. There was a board not far away that said the Desmoulins line was closed because of the drilling below, and beyond that, elaborate iron gates that led out into the fog. 'Definitely ... London in England?' he asked eventually.



‘It is,’ the man said.

‘Oh,’ said Joe.

The train breathed steam again and made the man into a ghost. Through all the bubbling panic, Joe thought he must have been a doctor, because he still didn’t seem surprised. ‘What’s your name?’ the man asked. Either he had a young voice, or he looked older than he was.

‘Joe.’ He had to reach for it, but he did know; that was a thump of a relief. ‘Tournier.’

‘Do you know where you live?’

‘No,’ he said, feeling like he might collapse.

‘Let’s get you to a hospital then,’ the man said.

So the man paid for a cab. Joe expected him to leave it at that, but he came too and said there was no reason why not, since he wasn’t busy. A thousand times in the following months, Joe tried to remember just what the man had looked like. He couldn’t, even though he spent the whole cab ride opposite him; all he remembered later was that the man had sat without leaning back, and that something about him seemed foreign, even though he spoke English in the hard straight way that old people did, the belligerent ones who’d always refused to learn French and scowled at you if you tried to call them monsieur.

It was maddening, that little but total failure of observation, because he took in everything else perfectly. The cab was a new one, all fresh leather and smelling of polish that was still waxy to touch. Later, he could even remember how steam had risen from the backs of the horses, and the creak of the wheel springs when they moved from the cobbles outside the station to the smoother-paved way down Rue Euston.

But not the man. Even sitting there, Joe could tell it was going to be hard to remember him later. It was as though the forgetfulness wasn’t so much an absence of memory, but a shroud that clung to him.



The road looked familiar and not. Whenever they came to a corner Joe thought he knew, there was a different shop there to the one he'd expected, or no building at all. Other cabs clopped past. Brown fog pawed interestedly against the shop windows. The sky was grey. In the background, he wondered if the man wasn't being kind at all but taking advantage of things somehow, but he couldn't think what for.

Not far away, monster towers pumped fumes into that gunmetal sky. They were spidered about with gantries and chutes, and in the flues, tiny flames burned. On the side of an enormous silo, he could just make out BLAST FURNACE 5 stamped in white letters in French. Joe swallowed. He knew exactly what they were – steelworks – but at the same time, they filled him with the dream-sense of wrongness that the Métro signs at the station had done. He shut his eyes and tried to chase down what he knew. Steelworks; yes, London was famous for that, that was what London was for. Seven blast furnaces up around Farringdon and Clerkenwell, hauling steel out to the whole Republic. If you bought a postcard of London, it always looked amazing, because of that towering tangle of pipework and coal chutes and chimneys in the middle of it. It was a square mile that had turned everything black with soot: the ruin of St Paul's, the leaning old buildings round Chancery Lane, everything. That was why London was the Black City.

But all that might as well have come from an encyclopaedia. He didn't know how he knew it. He didn't remember walking in those black streets or around the steelworks, or any of it.

'Did you get off the same train as me?' he asked the man, hoping that if he focused on one particular thing, he might feel less sick.

'Yes. It came from Glasgow. We were in the same carriage.' The man had a clipped way of talking, but his whole body was full of compassion. He looked like he was stopping himself





leaning forward and taking Joe's hands. Joe was glad about that. He would have burst into tears.

He couldn't remember being on the train. The man tried to tell him things that had been memorable, like the funny snootiness of the conductor and the way the fold-down beds tried to eat you if you didn't push them down properly, but none of it was there. He confirmed that Joe hadn't fallen or bumped anything, just started to look disorientated early this morning. It was nine o'clock now.

Joe had to let his head bow and breathe slowly. He'd never been scared like it. He opened the window, just to inhale properly. Everything smelled of soot. That was familiar, at least. On the pavements, droves of men in black coats and black hats poured from the iron gates of the Métro stations. They all looked the same. The cab stopped for a minute or so, waiting at a railway crossing. The train was a coal cargo, chuntering towards the steelworks. The whistle howled as the driver tried to scare off some kids on the line; there were ten or twelve, foraging for the bits of coal that fell off the carriages.

'You'll be all right,' the man said quietly. It was the last thing he said; while Joe was seeing the doctor, he vanished. None of the nurses had seen him go, or seen him at all, and Joe started to think he had got himself to the hospital alone, and that the man had just been a sort of benign hallucination.

There were two hospitals. The first was the Colonial Free, which was a dark, frozen place where all the windows stayed open to air the wards, and an exhausted doctor referred him, urgently, to an asylum over the river. Then there was another cab ride, by himself, paid for by the hospital. He curled up under his coat on the way, cold right to the marrow now. More of the black streets glided by, the old terraces like widow's lace. Then there was the Tamise: black too, and so packed with cargo ships that a limber





person could have got across the whole breadth of it jumping from deck to deck. Normal, all normal. Except he felt like someone had left him on the surface of Mars.

The second hospital was called La Nouvelle Salpêtrière. It was a much nicer place than Joe had expected of an asylum. South of the river, in Southwark, it was an impressive building that looked much more like a museum or a bank than a hospital. He had imagined it would be grim and white inside, but in fact it was hard to tell that it was an asylum at all. The entrance hall was all marble and pillars, nice couches, and chandeliers of electric lights. Someone deep in the building was playing the piano.

On the way upstairs to the consultant's office, the nurse took him past two cells lined completely with cork, but the doors were open and nobody was inside. There was, said the nurse, a criminal wing, where the cases were far more serious, but it was separate. The only other sign that perhaps not everyone there was to be trusted were the cages around the fireplaces.

While he was waiting outside the consultant's office, a man lent him a copy of *Le Monde* and claimed to control the weather. Joe sat holding the paper, looking at the words and the typeface, and trying to trace why it was all wrong. It didn't say anything extraordinary. There was the weather in one column – it didn't match what the man predicted – an advert for silk shirts, one for a M. d'Leuve's brand-new invention, an electric corset which was apparently very good for feminine discomforts. He wondered at that, because Madeline had never seemed so uncomfortable that she would need electrifying. He frowned at his knees when he realised he had remembered a name, and her face; a small woman with dark hair, who suited dark green. He couldn't think of a last name, or if she was a sister or a wife, or neither.

The doctor's office was airy and impressive, with a bleak, beautiful view over the hospital's frosty lawns. On the wall was





a certificate from an academy in Paris. The desk had bite marks on one leg, near the top. Joe looked round for the dog that must have done that but couldn't see one, which was a lot more disconcerting than it should have been. All the details landed in his mind like bright pins, sharp and pricking and very unpleasant.

The doctor explained that he would be there for a week, on the understanding that the accommodation fees would be waived. 'Now, you've been referred from the Colonial Free, I see. I can tell you now exactly what you're suffering from. It's a seizure; a form of epilepsy. With any luck, it will go off soon.'

'A seizure?'

The doctor set the notes down and smiled. He was young and smartly turned out, Parisian; on colonial placement, probably, to rack up experience before returning to France. Joe felt hopeless. The more he thought about it, the more he realised he knew general things, but nothing specific.

'Yes,' the doctor said. 'I'm personally very interested in this particular epilepsy type, so I've been asking for cases, hence your referral. It's what we're calling silent epilepsy; it doesn't come with convulsions, only the symptoms we would usually associate with an epileptic aura – amnesia, paramnesia, visions. Had anything of the latter two?'

'What does paramnesia mean?' Joe asked. The doctor's voice was so posh that he could feel himself furling up inside with the urge to keep his answers short, and not to ask questions or to waste time.

'The blurring of something imaginary and something real. Most commonly, *déjà vu*; the sense you've seen something new before. And its opposite, *jamais vu*, which is when something that should be familiar feels wholly alien.'

'Yes!' Joe said fast, and felt his eyes burn, desperately grateful to hear someone name the feeling. 'Yes, that second one, ever since that man found me at the station! I didn't think the Gare





du Roi was in London, all the streets looked wrong, the – *news-papers* look wrong ...’

‘Textbook,’ the doctor said gently. ‘Absolutely. Now, I can promise you that you *do* know Londres, because you’ve got a very strong Clerkenwell accent.’ He smiled again. ‘Let’s see what happens if we keep you here in the quiet for a few days. I’m putting you down as a curable,’ he added, motioning at the form in front of him.

‘What if it doesn’t go away?’ Joe said. He swallowed, because he was having to speak carefully. It felt like he hadn’t spoken for a long, long time, which was absurd, because he had spoken before, at the other hospital, and the train station. But the order of words felt wrong. French, they were speaking French of course, and the man at the station had spoken English; maybe it was just the switchover.

‘Well, let’s talk about that in the—’

‘No, let’s talk about it now, please.’

‘There’s no need to be aggressive,’ the doctor said, sharp. He drew back in his chair a few inches, as though he thought Joe might punch him.

Joe frowned. ‘I’m not being aggressive, I’m really scared.’

The honesty seemed to take the doctor by surprise. He had the grace to look awkward. ‘You understand my caution. Your notes say you arrived at the Colonial Free speaking English, and that coat you’re wearing now has a tartan lining. The train you were on came from Glasgow.’ His tone turned from questioning to accusatory by the end.

‘Sorry?’ said Joe, lost.

‘If I say the Saints to you, does that ring a bell?’

Joe searched for it, but got nothing. ‘Is that a church?’

‘No, it’s a terrorist group that makes a habit of bombing trains and random sections of the Republic.’

‘Oh. And they ...’





‘Speak English and wear tartan and occupy Edinburgh, which does not have a railway connection, for obvious reasons, to Londres. They use Glasgow.’

Joe stared down at the lining of his coat sleeve. ‘I ... really can’t see myself bombing anything. I think I’d go to pieces under pressure. I *am* going to pieces. Have ... gone.’

The doctor must have thought so too, because he relented. ‘*If* it doesn’t go away, it means that there may be a lesion or a tumour pressing on part of your brain, in which case, there’s very little we can do, and it will probably prove fatal eventually.’ He said it bluntly, punishment for Joe’s having scared him before. ‘Meanwhile, we’re putting your details and description in the papers. See if we can find you some relatives.’

Joe knew he should say thank you, but it was an uphill struggle to say anything at all now. ‘And if no one comes?’

‘The county asylum is free, so you could go there.’ The doctor winced at the idea, and Joe tried not to imagine what the county asylum was like. ‘But as I say, we’re putting you up for the week, so we have until next Tuesday.’

‘Right.’

A huge dog padded in and put its head on Joe’s lap, and looked at him hopefully until he stroked its ears. It was a relief to see that there really was a dog, and that it wasn’t a patient who’d gnawed on the table leg.

‘Don’t mind Napoleon, he’s very friendly. However,’ the doctor continued, as if he hadn’t mentioned the dog, ‘I’ve never seen a case that hasn’t cleared in a few days, if not a few hours. And it’s an incredibly common condition. We had a rush of people with it a couple of months ago and they all recovered perfectly. Not so bad as this, but precisely the same thing.’

Joe looked up from the dog. ‘A group of people with the same thing in the same timeframe implies an external cause that affects all of them. Doesn’t it?’





The doctor widened his eyes, then laughed, as if it was surprising that Joe would know words like implies and external. ‘Well, yes. A cluster does imply an external cause. But there is no geographical cluster. Patients from right across the Republic have experienced it, from Rome to Dublin. We’re looking into all sorts: weather, water tables, crops, air miasma. But don’t worry yourself. We’ll work it out.’

Joe nodded.

‘Settle down, have a game of tennis with someone. Plenty of veterans here, wonderful fellows, they just don’t get on so well with sudden noises. I’ll see you in a few days.’

Joe wanted to ask more, but that was that, because a woman drifted in holding a doll too tightly and pointed at the dog, and the doctor hurried up to ease her away again. The dog followed them.

