

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Homecoming



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My brother drowned in the bath, and nothing was quite the same again.

They said he'd had a seizure, but he'd never had one before. I didn't understand it and neither did Mum. We couldn't accept that he was gone. Mum still poured him a drink in the mornings then realised he'd never walk down those stairs again and hug her, and the glass would be tipped away. And I knew Luc hadn't died in that bath because sometimes I'd see him wandering the cobbled streets of Paris at night.

I had snuck out one evening whilst Mum, asleep, cradled an empty glass. Her hands had got old; overnight, I think, or perhaps it was a trick of the light. She needed the curtains drawn and the lamps low because she has a permanent headache. I didn't know where I was going – just *somewhere*. I needed the air and the sparkling lampposts and the men and women who carried on with life as it was before Luc hadn't died in that bath.

I spent a few minutes mingling with a crowd, gathering around a mime artist. I heard languages from across Europe: tourists drawn to the city for the football. English, German, and Chinese, definitely, but I was sure I heard Belgian and Spanish too. They paid little attention to me. Like I was a street urchin, like it was the 1800s or something. They didn't notice me slipping away, down quieter alleyways where only the natives go. There was a dog barking somewhere and a mist was settling over the river. Stalls had been packed away from the thoroughfare and shoved back into unused doorways at the back of houses, handmade signs advertising jewellery, posters and books. Peering through grating, I could see Asterix, Tintin and the beautiful 1960s Disney adaptations of classic fairytales and folklore, colours still fresh but their bindings beaten and torn. My Father, when I was young, had given me *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and read it to me at bedtime, teasing me with further details, further truths. "It didn't *really* happen like that," he'd say, as if he were there. But that was a long time ago and I can only remember his voice.

I don't know what time it was – certainly past my bedtime – but I saw Luc across the river. He was part of a group, right at the edge of the Seine. They were all looking down at the water, as one. It was calm but I could still hear it rushing past. They were saying something, I think. Or screaming. Or–

Then they looked up and shut their mouths and stared straight at me and the noise of gushing water stopped.

The lamppost was a little way away, down past the *Bibliothèque*, but I could still see the outlines of their faces, especially the way they were smiling. I swear I recognised a few of them, but only Luc raised his arm and waved at me.

I ran.

I couldn't help it – I just ran. As fast as I could, straight home.

Mum was awake, waiting in the kitchen. When she saw me, she made to shout but stopped when I hugged her. I think she could feel my tears pressing into her. "Sweetheart?" she said. "What's wrong?" I couldn't tell her, of course. What could I say? *Hey Mum – don't worry, Luc's not dead and he's hanging around by the waterside with a group of mismatched pals including Ms. Lomond who died in the winter?* I watched her lock the door and went to bed.

I had to go back the following night. I had to make sure I hadn't been dreaming. It was a very real concern: my dreams had largely focussed on my brother, calling to me, or playing football or swimming and swimming and swimming into the horizon, his little legs kicking, flailing, and sometimes he wasn't swimming at all.

Luc was there again, as was Ms. Lomond Who Had Died In The Winter and the group of supposedly dead people. He didn't see me, or maybe he did and just didn't want to acknowledge me. Maybe I had upset him, running away like that.

The day after, we were informed that Luc's body had been 'misplaced' in the morgue. An administrative error, we were assured.

I returned to the riverside each night and each time, the group seemed to have grown. Returning to that spot every night was an odd ritual and in only a few days, I got better at sneaking out and Mum thought I was tucked under the sheets dreaming of a speck of a boy on the horizon of the sea, whilst she drank herself to sleep.

Each night, I'd go and visit my not-dead brother and that is how I met the Doctor and his American friend, Peri.

I had gone out earlier than usual. The moon was already out, reflected in the tributary like an Impressionist painting. There was an evening wind blowing up, scouring the side streets, but it hadn't put off the tourists. There was talk of the Cathedral, of *Le Calife*, of the seedier parts of the city. A particularly raucous couple were on their honeymoon.

Perhaps they all thought the lines of not-quite-dead lining the periphery of the Seine were a French tradition.

I returned to the well-worn cobbles as I had done for the past week. By that time, I felt it was my duty to visit Luc's ghost. I couldn't let him suffer – was he suffering? I never found out – accompanied only by strangers. He had to know someone was there for him (even though I always felt too... intimidated – not scared – to show my face).

Only that night, he wasn't there for me.

I searched around, of course, but he wasn't on the banks at all. Well, he may've been far further up, but I doubted it even then. And now, I know that he was not.

It would've taken far too long to check everywhere – in fact, it would probably have proven impossible – but even so, my search was interrupted completely by that strange man.

He was a shock to the night. I was silent and he was a burst of loud eccentricity.

"I rarely come to this decade at all, Peri." That was the first thing I heard him say. I suppose it was an odd thing to say, but he was an odd man. "It lacks finesse," he continued, his booming voice an affront to the uneasy peace that settled on the embankments. "It lacks the subtlety I have grown accustomed to. It's all rave and punk and" – he spat out the word – "denim."

"Oh yeah," came the droll response, "*that'd* be a fashion crime."

He seemed to ignore her: "Ah, but not here. Smell that air."

"It stinks." (In fairness to her, the Seine does tend to smell a bit after a long Summer's day.)

"Stinks? Stinks?! That is fresh, Peri. It is rich and bold. You wouldn't understand, what with all that pollution clogging up the Atlantic, and - - oh, hello!"

They had just rounded the corner and it was the first time I had seen them. I have witnessed some sights in Paris – Sacré-Cœur is a whole other world – but this man was completely different. He was confident and sad, somehow. He had curly hair, the likes of which my Mum had always wanted me to have. His clothes were louder than the Metro. Even though he spoke French fluently, he was not Parisian. It was an incredible achievement that he was the overly brash one, standing, as he was, next to an American.

Peri, (I had already gathered that to be her name), had an affable air about her, though you could tell her face was well-accustomed to frowning. Her black hair was short, dangling about her neck; her shirt was short, showing off her midriff (and quite a bit more of her torso); her shorts were really short; everything about her was short, though not, as I have since learnt, as short as the Doctor's temperament.

"Hello," I replied. But he was not talking to me. In fact, the pair only then noticed me.

(Peri uttered a quick "hi" back and I decided I liked her – as did, I'm sure, much of the male population. She gave a little grin too and it's this that sticks with me, even today. It certainly was a shame she died that night.)

Instead, the Doctor was staring across the tributary, and I followed his gaze.

The Not Quite Dead were looking up, their heads tilted to one side, and a collective smile on their pale faces.

Without taking his eyes off them, the curly-haired man strode over to me and vigorously shook my hand. His grip was strong. "Hello, young man," he said. "I'm the Doctor. I don't suppose you could tell me what's going on here...?"

"Erm - - "

"No, I didn't think so." He walked closer to the edge and addressed the row of people on the other side. "I'm the Doctor," he yelled at them (I'm sure they had heard him when he had spoken to me, however), "and I was just wondering if I could help you at all."

Their eyes all grew wider, wilder. Then they opened their mouths, and I heard a terrible noise. It was like boiling water, I suppose, but it was in my ears and there was a heartbeat in there somewhere too; I wasn't sure if it were mine or...

"Doctor?" I heard Peri say. And the next voice was his: it was a voice not to be messed with.

"Run."

I had not run that fast for a good number of years. The last time was probably when I was scared of being beaten up after I told on some bullies in school. The beating did come, naturally, but it wasn't until the following day and in retrospect, it didn't even hurt that badly.

The Doctor was fast. He had obviously had some practise. Peri, too, was no stranger to running, but she wasn't as fast as I was. When I turned back to look at her, the Not Quite Dead had impossibly crossed the tributary, seemingly in a single step. They were gaining on us, but their gait was decidedly creepy, stiffer, more – well, more dead; their arms hung by their sides, their heads awkwardly fixed and their mouths not panting at the air.

A few years ago, Luc had played with a dead seagull. Its head, its legs, its body were limp, but Luc had carried it around by its wings like a puppet, freaking out the other kids. I'm not

ashamed to admit that for the next fortnight, I slept with the curtains shut and a box jammed against the door in case deceased birds saw me through the window and tried to get in.

The Not Quite Dead were like that.

The seagull had been dripping blood – I never found out what killed it – and the Not Quite Dead were dripping too; not blood though. It was water and it glimmered with the stinging lights of Paris.

And they were catching up. Close enough to touch Peri. I'm not sure what happened next, but I think it was the water, the puddles trailing our pursuers, and I think - - It sounds ridiculous, impossible, but I think the water leapt up and touched Peri's leg and dragged her down.

The Doctor yelled for her and then he, too, was on the ground.

I slowed down and went back for him. A complete stranger, and I just risked my life for him. I'm proud of that. I think that's how humans should be. I didn't do this because my ideals forced me to, however: it was a natural instinct. This man I had just met, this man who carried the magic of twilight in his steps, had to live.

The Doctor was grabbing at his head, as if his secrets were being ripped from his mind, screams pouring from him. The water had not got to him. I pulled him to his feet and risked a quick look back. Peri had gone (somewhere in my head, I recall hearing a splash coming from the Seine as if a body had been dropped in) and the Not Quite Dead had slowed. It looked like they were smiling and staring at the Doctor, but I may have been mistaken.

The man was heavy but co-operating. He dragged his legs, stumbling with weighty footfalls - but progressing. His face was chiselled with a terrible pain, but his screams were getting quieter as we got further from the river.

Left at the newsagent; across the street; right at the tree; down the alley that smelled of Chinese food; left after the bins: I realised I was heading home, and the Doctor was coming with me.

"But Peri - -"

"I'm sorry, Doctor," I said to him between large gulps of air. "She's dead."

He had wanted to go back, but was clearly exhausted. His eyes were red and his gait sluggish. "We're nearly home," I told him, and that had quietened him up. I thought the fight had gone from him; in retrospect, I couldn't have been more wrong.

The city was not as silent as I had expected it to be. Paris was... unsettled. It wasn't full of drunks and homeless people, tourists and football hooligans. There seemed to be something in the air. The streets weren't deserted, but an eerie quiet had descended. I couldn't put my finger on it. And I had bigger things to worry about anyway. I had never been out that late before and knew that Mum would shout at me. No doubt, an absence this lengthy would be obvious, even to someone as well-oiled as her. I also thought she'd take issue with me bringing home a stranger. I was wrong on both accounts.

Progress was slow. The Doctor was still recovering from whatever had happened to him. He kept muttering, perhaps to me or maybe to himself. He threw out words like "empathic" (or something), "bacteria" (or similar), and "hateful."

There was only one thing he had definitely directed to me: "I'm sorry about your brother."

I didn't ask how he knew. Maybe he didn't. Maybe it was a guess. A guess based on... Well, he was obviously a very clever man. A very odd man too.

Sure enough, when I got home, all the lights were on. I was still supporting the Doctor, but he seemed more upbeat when I said we were at the end of our journey and that he could rest at our house. It's not a big house, but there'd be space on the settee for him and I was sure Mum had some spare pillows in the cupboard – that is, if she let this stranger stay.

She had obviously been watching from the window for me because she immediately rushed out the door. "Matthieu!" she called to me. I was surprised to see she was smiling.

"Mum, I'm sorry I –"

"Something wonderful has happened!" Her eyes were bright, brighter than I'd seen for far too long. Then she reconsidered the scene before her, looking at the Doctor. "Who's this?"

"He's... He's a friend. He's been hurt. Can we go inside please?"

The Doctor gave her a brief smile, bowed his head and uttered, "Madam."

Mum took a second then put her arm around him. "Of course, sweetheart." And she helped me walk him to the door.

"What's happened then, Mum?"

"It's Luc," she said, beaming. "He came to visit me."

This was the night the dead of Paris returned home.

Luc wasn't there anymore: he had told Mum that he had things to sort out, now that he's 'back.' What a child that young has to sort out is anyone's guess, as is why Mum let him leave. Likely she was flustered and panicking; it's not every day your dead son comes back for dinner.

The Doctor, his eyes still red, his pallor still pale, but his interest piqued, sat in the chair opposite, whilst Mum sat with me on the settee, holding my hands in hers, even though it was far too hot to maintain such intimacy for very long. She spoke in bursts of excitement, as if her thoughts were just tumbling out of her.

"He said the police had got it wrong, and I did say he was gonna be fine, didn't I? Remember me telling you that?"

"You were just trying to comfort me."

"Nonsense. He's fine. He just has stuff to sort out."

"And how'd he look?" This was the Doctor. It came out of nowhere. Mum, for a very brief second, looked upset – insulted even.

"Fine," she replied curtly, then turned back to me: "He says he's seen you around. Have you seen him around, Matthieu?" – I shook my head, something I felt bad for doing, but she carried on regardless – "And he says he's coming back too. He just has stuff to sort out."

"What stuff?" The Doctor interjected again.

"Just stuff. Who are you, anyway – and what *are* you doing here?"

"I'm the Doctor, and... I think my friend is dead."

He hung his head. Mum's mood lightened and she smiled awkwardly between us. "Well," she said, "this is Paris and miracles happen here."

He looked up at her. His eyes, I noticed then, weren't just red, but old. He must've only been in his late 30s, early 40s, but his eyes betrayed him. The Doctor didn't respond to her.

It turned out that we weren't the only ones to get visits that night. The Not Quite Dead had wandered the streets of the city, making their final calls to family and friends. Even Mrs. Lomond, who had been so grumpy when holiday season came around, had met up with tourists and told them to visit the Seine at midnight for a 'special show.' She didn't have any relatives left. I was the

only one who ever visited her when she was alive. Luc used to call her a mad old bat and played that game which nobody ever won, knocking on her door and running away. When I told him she had an artificial hip and it hurt her to get up to answer the door, he had just shrugged.

He could be like that sometimes. I still missed him though.

Mum told me the Doctor could stay - "one night" – and then told me to get to bed. It was already far too late for a young boy with school in the morning.

"Don't you want a bath before you go to bed?" the Doctor asked, rhetorically. It wasn't jovial though. It was almost like he knew.

A silence hung in the air. Just for a second. It reminded me of the night after Luc had... well, not died. He did die. He is dead. But we didn't think that back then. Did we? I find it hard to believe any more.

The Doctor was lucky Mum didn't throw him out there and then. I presume she thought it was an innocent enough question. She obviously didn't see his eyes. Aside from that, she needed someone to look after me that night. She had to go to the Seine. Luc had told her about a special show on at midnight.

I went up to my room, drew the curtains and jammed a box behind the door.

Luc was swimming in an endless blue. He was with Peri. The seagulls, their heads and legs hanging limply but their wings propped up by an invisible master, circled overhead. I dipped a toe in.

"– telling you not to go. This will not end well."

It was a clear and distinct voice, cutting through my dreamscape like an ocean liner. It was the Doctor, and it was followed by a door slamming.

I moved the box and went out into the hallway, down the stairs and saw the Doctor standing at *la salle de séjour* window. His face was hard and set, and he clung onto his lapels, seemingly deep in thought. Mum was gone. Without looking up at me, he said, simply: "Get dressed. This ends tonight."

I turned to go back upstairs and as I did, he muttered quietly, "And I'm sorry."

I'd never seen the Seine at midnight, but I gathered it was not supposed to be how it was.

The Not Quite Dead lined the sides, dark silhouettes against the glistening city lights; their hands joined, their old clothes and thinning hair picked up by the gentle breeze, and their mouths open in a chorus. The sound of water galloping through the veins of Paris echoed deep into the night – but the Seine was quiet. Still, even.

It would have been beautiful. My eyes stung. It wasn't just tiredness; my lip was trembling, and a lone tear spread across the bottom of my eyelid. I didn't know what it was. You know when you listen to music, a particular track, and an overwhelming, impossible mix of sadness and hope washes over you, that same feeling you get when you remember something that happened years ago and so much has changed, and you wish you could go back but thank God you have that quiet little memory or else this day would be meaningless. I think that's how the Doctor lives.

He put his warm hand in mine and assured me, "Everything will be alright." He couldn't have known that, and I was angry at him for false security. Because nothing was "alright." The

Not Quite Dead weren't the only ones at the riverside. They were joined by those coerced into attending the midnight gathering, Parisians of all shapes and sizes: students and tourists and friends and Mum. There she was, right on the edge, staring deep into the cold eyes of Luc. They were holding hands and absolutely nothing was "alright."

I wondered if this was why the Doctor had brought me with him. It had seemed such an odd thing to do. There's that word again: odd. This man was odd, and this situation was odd and the oddest thing in the world to me was how Mum was smiling and crying as she was finally reunited with her son. She was happy. Happy enough to hug him and fall silently into the water.

"No!" I yelled, hands outstretched, as if I were going to catch her. The Doctor pulled me back. Faces of the Not Quite Dead arched around, unnaturally, staring dead at us. The Doctor gave me a fleeting look and under his breath said, "We'll go together." Then his attention went back to the scores of people, queuing up for their place in the water.

We moved forwards slowly. The Not Quite Dead didn't flinch, didn't stir, didn't even blink. But then, why would they ever need to blink? I wasn't sure what the Doctor was up to, but seeing as we were getting closer to the Seine, a strange mix of curiosity and terror came over me. Most of all, I wanted to know Mum was okay. I couldn't really believe that Luc would hurt her. Would he? The old Luc wouldn't. Not Mum anyway.

"Hello again," he said to them. "Now, we were just getting acquainted when you rather rudely tried to kill us. I'm the Doctor, but I'm pretty sure you know that already," he continued, taking my hand in his once more. "Something else you should know; something that you'll very swiftly pick from the mind of the lady you just so carelessly flung into the water. This ends tonight."

The noise of the rising water bubbled further, but this time in a strange rhythmic pattern. It was almost as if the seas were laughing.

As we got closer, I could see the Seine far clearer – yet it didn't look like the Seine at all. No lights were reflected in it: it was a void, a deep cut torn through the city. The water didn't seem to be stirring, except in tiny motions around *what was floating in the water*.

Right on the top, floating straight and rigid like planks of wood, were the people that the Not Quite Dead had convinced to come along. Or, of course, people they'd snatched from the streets. Mum was there. So was Peri.

Their eyes were tight shut, their lips were pale, water creeping up around the depressions of their faces. But their chests were rising and falling, slowly yet definitely. The Doctor later described it as akin to being comatose.

We were right on the edge, looking down into this great chasm. The Not Quite Dead had parted to let us through. Which was considerate and only mildly chilling. I was worried that they'd push us in, but for some reason, I trusted the Doctor. I did. Even when he turned to me, asked me if I was ready, and without waiting for a response, jumped into the Seine, pulling me down with him.

It wasn't like midnight. The void through Paris wasn't black, not from the inside; it was like one of those mirrors the police use to keep witnesses being witnessed themselves. From one side, it's a mirror. From the other, it's a window.

The river was dark and deep, but the blackness was far, far below and the world around me was an impressionist's painting, slabs of colour piled together to create a searing, vivid picture. I

suppose I should've been cold, but I can only remember the blistering heat of breaking through the atmosphere.

It seemed to burn forever, flakes of myself lost in the swirling blue of space, breaking parts off and disregarding them on a whim. It's a disgusting waste, after travelling from so far, for so long. A meteor. No, a meteorite. I reached out and there, once more, was the Doctor's hand.

"What's happening, Doctor?" I managed to ask, even though my mouth was dry, my skin was aching, and my legs were weak.

There were city lights; shapes and people and noises, ascending from the overwhelming afterlife. I'd seen it a thousand times, but somehow, Notre Dame seemed new to me, a sentinel stood by the banks.

"Bacteria," came the reply, long after I had first asked the question. "Calling out. Screaming. A singular collective, sharing the same thoughts through a telepathic field."

The river welcomed us, enveloping us, consuming us.

"Doctor, I think we're drowning."

He ignored me: "Imagine having part of yourself ripped away from you."

I could see Luc.

He was drifting purposefully towards me, his feet bare and deep red veins carved around his neck. And he had brought Mum with him. They reached out. The Doctor was nowhere to be seen. I think he was still holding my hand though.

"But that's not all, is it?" the Doctor carried on. "Shared thoughts means shared feelings. And once you're in the water" – was he talking to me? Was he talking to *it*? – "you can seep into the city, into the people... Feel something other than indescribable pain and torment, rage against the dying of the night."

Why wouldn't he let go of my hand? All I wanted to do was feel Luc's hand in mine, running along the breadth of the river, as we had done when he was little, and I was showing him what it felt like to have the wind blow through your hair.

"You could've reached out to anyone." The Doctor's voice cut through everything. "There's so much happiness and hope in this world. But you reached out to a little boy, didn't you?"

And then the Doctor showed me something I never wanted to see. The slabs of colour reshaped themselves, almost grudgingly. They scraped along, leaving residue in their wake, a path of pastel and charcoal and rubbings, and formed, right in the middle of the Seine, a bathtub. The Doctor showed me how Luc had died.

The water is too hot. Mum wouldn't like it, but if I'm careful and quiet, she won't hear me.

I turn the tap on and gradually, everything around me cools down. The steam that had risen up, coating the frosted windows, is cast out and my skin stops prickling. I stop the tap; it's cool enough and if I carry on, it'll overflow and that'll make Mum even more cross.

She is not a cross person, though. Not normally. She's just had a busy day. And I do love her.

... "One little boy, full of" ...

I have to wash my hair; I know that. Mum would definitely be cross if I don't. It is, after all, a school night. I gasp at the air and dip my head under. The water engulfs my face, rising up and into my ears and over my head and my hair sways in all directions, like when I used to run along the river banks with Matthieu and the wind ruffled around me.

I emerge. Water cascades from my forehead and curves into my eyes.

The thing I really hate about school is Matthieu's class. He is a few years older than I am and all those kids are bigger than me. And I know those three stupid kids who beat him up when he was walking home that one time.

I dip my head under again, just to be thorough.

They're bigger than me and all I want to do is punch them again and again and again because they hurt my Matthieu, and I want everyone to know that he is the most important thing in my world, and no one will ever touch him again.

..."hate and pain"...

I can't get up.

Oh mon Dieu. I can't get up. Why can't I -? There's something dragging me down. I'm struggling to –

..."You've convinced yourself it was like calling to like"...

Help me. Please. Someone! Help me!

... "But that's a lie"...

I try to thrash about, to move, to pull up, all my muscles straining, and I call out for Mum–

Mum must've seen it too.

"He's dead," she said simply. All hope drained away from her. Her body seemed to go limp – just for a second. Because then she turned in disgust at Luc, still floating there in the middle of the river. She pulled her hands away. And repeated: "He's dead."

"No," I replied. "That's not how people die. That's impossible."

I could see the Doctor again. He was staring in dismay at me, confusion etched on his face. "Matt," he started, "people do drown, and there's noth –"

"Who the hell are you anyway?!" I yelled at him. Luc was smiling. "You turn up and force yourself into our lives and you say all these odd things and you act like you know it all. But you don't! You don't. Because that is *not* how people die. Water doesn't pull you under. Water lets you go. People don't die like that. And Luc is not dead."

The noise was everywhere. That same rumbling, a beat echoing around me. Like laughter. I could see them all now. Silhouettes drifting towards me, nodding and smiling: some people I knew; some were complete strangers, united. Did you know that the body is between approximately 50% and 65% water? A newborn baby can be up to 75%. Did you also know that the Seine is a hot spot for suicides, murders and accidents? Like calling to like. Have you heard of *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, a girl who smiled sweetly as she lost herself in the waves? Everybody loves her; everybody kisses her. It was all perfectly clear to me. Here they were, all coming home. And Luc was not dead.

The Doctor finally let go of my hand.

I reached forwards, desperately trying to grab onto Luc. Suddenly, he flinched backwards, almost like instinct, but that didn't stop me touching his hand.

He was so cold. *Oh mon Dieu, il faisait si froid.*

And that's why the Doctor had needed me.

They said Luc had had a seizure, but he'd never had one before. I didn't understand it and neither did Mum. We couldn't accept that he was gone. Mum still poured him a drink in the mornings then realised he'd never walk down those stairs again and hug her, and the glass would

be tipped away. And I knew Luc hadn't died in that bath because sometimes I'd see him wandering the cobbled streets of Paris at night.

Only now, he was part of a world that was very quickly melting away.

The noise was in my head, consuming me; the Dead clawed upwards, grabbing at my foot, at my trousers, at my shirt, at my neck. Was it the Dead? It felt like the water was dragging me down. The bodies were aching for the open sky. Their faces were hollow, eyes eroding into blackness, and their mouths outstretched in a horrible collective silent scream.

Their hands though – their hands were everywhere. They were a mire closing around me and however much I struggled, however much I reached up, I knew there was no escaping them. I tried to thrash about, to move, to pull up, all my muscles straining, and I called out for Mum –

And then there were hands around my outstretched arm. These hands were warm.

The air overtook my lungs and I very briefly saw the Doctor, Peri and Mum, just before it all became too much, and I passed out.

I can't have been out long.

As I was coming to, I could hear the Doctor: "The TARDIS had grumbled when we landed in France. I put it down to some wayward time winds we had encountered in the Dundra system or that dodgy croissant I had when I was here with Romana, but maybe she could hear it too." (He wasn't making too much sense. But then, the Doctor never really made sense.)

I remember keeping my eyes shut for a few seconds after I regained consciousness, just content to know the Earth would carry on regardless. The next voice, I was pleased to hear, was Peri's.

"But I don't get it, Doctor. What actually happened?"

"Please pay attention, Peri. It's really very simple. Their telepathic field didn't just relate thoughts to one another; a shared mind means shared emotions. These were empathic creatures, torn from the sky and left to rot in your dismay world."

"Hey!" she interrupted. The Doctor, as ever, completely ignored her.

"They were dying," he continued, "and their only lifeline was belief; specifically, belief in the first human being they completely consumed. They were willing to drag every citizen of France with them."

"What, into death?" she asked. "Well, that's not very nice."

"They were scared!"

I sat up then. I knew about being scared. I think the Doctor knew about it too. Mum immediately hugged me. She spoke my name, over and over, almost in disbelief.

"See?" I heard the Doctor say. "Told you he'd be fine."

The light was bright. Circles of yellow and red and orange blinded me. The sun was finally coming up, warming the bones of all the stunned men and women, boys and girls lying about. A summer morning here will dry you out in no time. Peri would dry out soon, but the Doctor didn't give her the chance. I saw her and the Doctor (his hair, bizarrely, curly once more, despite his time in the depths) speak a moment. It was so quiet, so intimate, I couldn't tell a thing. I've since learnt to lip read but even that would have done little good: against the sun, they were just two enigmatic figures at the edge of my universe. I didn't see them go; I only saw the Doctor hug her, and I'm certain he held on for a very long time.

Mum wouldn't let me go and she wouldn't look to the left either.

On the edge of the embankment, at peace, was Luc, his eyes shut and his chest unmoving. The Doctor had helped bring him home.

I remember Luc's hand in mine, his *warm* hand in mine, as we ran alongside the river bank, wind catching our faces and I knew that we had been *so* alive.

My brother drowned in the bath, and nothing was quite the same again.

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Featuring the Eleventh Doctor, Kaylaar and Maggie Weitz

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"But Peri -"

"I'm sorry, Doctor," I said to him between large gulps of air. "She's dead."

Paris is a city of miracles. There's magic in its streets, in its Sacred Heart, and certainly in the Seine. This glittering scar through the cobbled lanes sums up the enigmatic majesty of the French capital. Perhaps that's why so many are drawn into it: the suicides, the murders, even the accidents, when people get just a little too close...

But you don't need to worry about the death toll any longer.
Tonight, the Seine is giving up its dead.

The dearly departed are visiting their loved ones. An old lady, who passed last winter, welcomes tourists to the area, smiling and laughing and promising a glorious midnight show. A drowned boy tells his mother that she shouldn't harbour any mistrust because death is not the end. And no, sir, there's no need for a Doctor: your American friend might've been swallowed by the river, but these are healing waters. She'll be back for you, don't you worry. Come see the Seine. Dip your head under the surface. It's like coming home, one last time.

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