

## Acclaim for Mario Escobar

“This is a powerful portrait of a woman fighting to preserve knowledge in a crumbling world.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON *THE LIBRARIAN OF SAINT-MALO*

“In *The Librarian of Saint-Malo*, Escobar brings us another poignant tale of sacrifice, love, and loss amidst the pain of war. The seaside town of Saint-Malo comes to life in rich detail and complexity under German occupation, as do the books—full of great ideas and the best of humanity—the young librarian seeks to save. This sweeping story gives us a glimpse into the past with a firm eye towards hope in our future.”

—KATHERINE REAY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF *THE PRINTED LETTER BOOKSHOP*

“Escobar’s latest (after *Auschwitz Lullaby*, 2018) is a meticulously researched story, recreating actual experiences of the 460 Spanish children who were sent to Morelia, Mexico, in 1937. Devastating, enlightening, and passionately told, Escobar’s novel shines a light on the experiences of the victims of war, and makes a case against those who would use violence to gain power. Although painful events in the story make it hard to read at times, the book gives a voice to so many whose stories are often overlooked, while inspiring the reader to never give way to fear or let go of one’s humanity.”

—BOOKLIST, STARRED REVIEW, ON *REMEMBER ME*

“Luminous and beautifully researched, *Remember Me* is a study of displacement, belonging, compassion, and forged family amidst a heart-wrenching escape from the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. A strong sense of place and the excavation of a little known part of history are reverently handled in a narrative both urgent and romantic. Fans of Arturo Pérez-Reverte, Chanel Cleeton, and Lisa Wingate will be mesmerized.”

—RACHEL McMILLAN, AUTHOR OF *THE LONDON RESTORATION*

“An exciting and moving novel.”

—PEOPLE EN ESPAÑOL ON *RECUÉRDAME*

“Escobar highlights the tempestuous, uplifting story of two Jewish brothers who cross Nazi-occupied France in hope of reuniting with their parents in this excellent tale . . . Among the brutality and despair that follows in the wake of the Nazis’ rampage through France, Escobar uncovers hope, heart, and faith in humanity.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON *CHILDREN OF THE STARS*

“A poignant telling of the tragedies of war and the sacrificing kindness of others seen through the innocent eyes of children.”

—J’NELL CIESIELSKI, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BEAUTY AMONG RUINS* AND *THE SOCIALITE*, ON *CHILDREN OF THE STARS*

“*Auschwitz Lullaby* grabbed my heart and drew me in. A great choice for readers of historical fiction.”

—IRMA JOUBERT, AUTHOR OF *THE GIRL FROM THE TRAIN*

“Based on historical events, *Auschwitz Lullaby* is a deeply moving and harrowing story of love and commitment.”

—HISTORICAL NOVELS REVIEW

**The**  
**Librarian *of***  
**Saint-Malo**

*ALSO BY MARIO ESCOBAR*

*Remember Me*

*Children of the Stars*

*Auschwitz Lullaby*

*The Teacher of Warsaw* (available June 2022)

# The Librarian *of* Saint-Malo

*a novel*

**MARIO ESCOBAR**



**THOMAS NELSON**  
*Since 1798*

*The Librarian of Saint-Malo*

English Translation © 2021 Thomas Nelson

*La Bibliotecaria de Saint-Malo*

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*To Elisabeth, who walked the walls of Saint-Malo  
and witnessed this novel come to life from my lips.*

*To the reader who told me her life story at a book  
signing in Zaragoza and who inspired this book.*

*For most men, war is the end of loneliness.  
For me, it is infinite solitude.*

ALBERT CAMUS (1913–1960), FRENCH AUTHOR

## A Note from the Author

**T***he Librarian of Saint-Malo* speaks to us of love, revenge, conscience, guilt, and the past that traps us and shapes our lives.

The idea behind this novel grew out of a visit I made to Saint-Malo in September 2018. The city, mostly rebuilt, immediately captured me. Its imposing walls, vast beaches with cinnamon-colored sand, bleached-rock fortresses, and tides that batter the small peninsula in the ocean's attempt to reclaim those haughty walls . . . I was a goner. As we walked along on top of the wall that surrounds the old city, I told my wife, Elisabeth, "I've got to write a story about this place."

My earlier books had focused on the devastating fallout of the Holocaust, but I wanted to show the suffering of the common people during the German occupation of France and home in on the terrible persecution that the occupation unleashed on culture and books in particular.

Sitting in front of Duchess Anne's castle, I recalled the thrilling experience a reader had recounted to me the year before in

## A Note from the Author

Zaragoza, Spain. The young woman told me in a few words her incredible story of love, pain, and illness. The two ideas melded and became this novel, inspired by real facts.

After France's surrender on June 22, 1940, the Nazis occupied the area of Saint-Malo and turned it into the stronghold of its famous Atlantic fortress to control the northern area of French Brittany. The inhabitants tried to passively resist their occupiers; they came from a long line of pirates and fearless men. But Andreas von Aulock, the colonel in charge, was ruthless and stamped out even the subtlest attempt at opposition. The German commander ordered the purge of the city's bookstores and libraries to get rid of subversive writings as outlined in the famous Liste Otto.

*The Librarian of Saint-Malo* tells the story of Jocelyn and Antoine Ferrec, a life full of love and literature. Pure hearts will shine out even in history's darkest moments.

MARIO ESCOBAR

MADRID, OCTOBER 2019

**The**  
**Librarian *of***  
**Saint-Malo**



# Prologue

Dear Marcel Zola:

Time takes care with no one. It weighs us down, bowing our backs to humiliate us; it slows our stride into insecure, hesitating steps. We start out running but gradually get to the point where we can't even walk without holding on to something. After health and beauty have left us, little by little it steals away everything we care about, all that really matters: the people we love—first our grandparents and parents, then friends, and lastly, if we manage to live long enough, our own children.

No one can beat the god Chronos. There are no winners. As we grow up, we lose our life moment by moment until everything's taken away from us the day we die. Existence orbits around the certainty of loss. Old age is not the passing of years but the destruction of all we hold dear. That is what I observe in your writings: your ability to detain the inevitable passage of time. That's why I love literature: Chronos

## Prologue

is powerless over it. The words of Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Balzac, Tolstoy, and all the authors the world has given us are the only things that can hold back the monster that devours everything and leaves it a pile of dust.

I am an ardent fan of your books. There are only three things I love in this world: my beloved husband, Antoine, the beautiful village of Saint-Malo, and the historic library I manage. The Hotel Désilles, where the library is located, was built in 1628 by Jean Grave, Sieur de Launay, and his wife, Bernardine Sere, shortly after they were married. André Désilles, the hero of Nancy, was born there, and now it houses the oldest and most beautiful books in the town. You may ask why I'm telling you all this. Who am I, a provincial librarian, who knows so little of the world and has only an old building for her kingdom? I ask myself the same. Perhaps because I fell in love with your novel, *The Blight*, and with that simple yet gut-wrenching description of the destruction of a city. Yes, Mr. Zola: I wept at the misfortune of your characters and Gabrielle's terrible illness, but now I'm living my version of it, France's very own plague.

You might not believe the things I'm about to tell you or, what's worse, you may not even care. I'm not just doing this to write a book about my love story and the horrible occupation of France by the Germans. Rather, my hope is that someday, when humanity regains its sanity, people will know that the only way to be saved from barbarianism is by love: loving books, loving people, and, though you may call me crazy, loving our enemies. There's no doubt that love is the most revolutionary choice and, therefore, the most persecuted and reviled. Augustine of Hippo's thrilling phrase still reverberates in my ears: "Love, and do what you will."

## Prologue

My grief began the same day as my happiness. It's always hard for humans to accept misfortune, as if bad things only happen to other people and we ourselves are out of harm's reach. The same day the Germans attacked Poland and plunged the world into a merciless war, Antoine and I were married in the Cathedral of Saint-Vincent in our lovely town of Saint-Malo. This is our story.

Jocelyn Ferrec



Part One

**One Summer Day**



# The Honeymoon

Saint-Malo  
September 1, 1939

Our good friend Denis Villeneuve, Brittany's most well-known bookseller, walked me down the aisle. Antoine and I had met in his bookstore two years prior. While I was flipping through a first edition of *Les Misérables*, the handsome young man behind me tripped, and a huge pile of books cascaded across the scuffed hardwood floor. I started to smile, then noticed his haste, so I bent down to help him collect the books. The young man looked up, and our eyes locked, just a few inches from each other. His blue irises were the intensity of the turquoise sea that bathes the city's beaches on sunny days. I had only been back in Saint-Malo for a few months. I had studied at a school run by nuns in Bordeaux and later in Rennes, then gotten a degree in

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philology. Nearly a decade had passed since I was last in town—after the car wreck that took my parents, nothing anchored me to Saint-Malo. But one of my professors in Rennes told me that the librarian's assistant position was open, so I applied, though without much hope.

As I walked down the long aisle of the cathedral, I could not hold back my tears. Antoine's family filled the front rows, but I had no one else in the world. Yet the sadness dissipated when I looked into the face of the man I loved. His dark red curly hair flopped over his forehead, and his features were soft. His thin lips were spread wide in an intoxicating smile.

The ceremony was simple and unadorned beyond the beauty of the cathedral itself, and the priest performed his duties efficiently that Friday afternoon. Our train would leave for Paris in about an hour, and if we did not arrive in time, we would lose our reservation for the sleeper car and for the Hotel Ritz the following day. That was no small matter for my librarian's salary and Antoine's modest earnings as a police sergeant.

As we walked back up the aisle, I greeted the guests while Denis fetched the car to take us to the station.

We hurried down the cathedral stairs, but before we reached the sidewalk, the bottom fell out of the dark clouds that had been threatening rain since the morning. The heavy curtain of rainwater soaked us to the bone before we even reached the convertible car. Denis raced to put up the car roof, then jumped back into the old Renault, and we bumped and jolted our way down the cobblestone roads of the walled city. Leaving the port behind, we headed inland as fast as possible toward the station.

Denis stopped at the entrance and got our suitcases out. Antoine picked me up and carried me so I would not have to step in the huge puddles in the cobblestone street, and thus we crossed

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the threshold into the train station like newlyweds entering their honeymoon suite. We dashed toward the platform. The train was revving up, blowing out steam as the passengers lingered over their goodbyes, as if fearing to never return. Summer's end left Saint-Malo rather empty and sad. The thousands of summertime visitors who soaked up its beaches and ancient fortresses disappeared every year at the coming of autumn.

"I'm green with envy! Paris is the most beautiful city in Europe!"

"Don't exaggerate, Denis. You know very well we won't be strolling down the Seine or the Champs-Élysées, not even touring Notre Dame," Antoine quipped.

"Ah, the Champs-Élysées . . . You know, in the Greek world, the Elysian Fields were reserved for virtuous souls." Denis winked after helping us hoist our luggage onto the wagon. He was always making such highbrow statements, seeing the inseparable connections between life and literature like sky and ocean at the horizon.

"Then come with us," I said.

"It's your lovers' journey. The City of Lights will have to wait."

We hugged our friend and, just as he hopped down to the platform, the train started to move. We leaned over the railing and waved at him with our gloved hands until he was no more than a speck.

As soon as the train left the station, the fat, cold drops of the rainstorm drenched our faces again. We locked eyes like that first time in the bookstore and walked smiling to our compartment. It was a sleeping car, but before turning in for the night we wanted to eat dinner and to toast with champagne. A wedding just isn't a real wedding without the clink of glasses filled with bubbly wine.

We took a seat at the last available table. Beside us, an elderly

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military man smiled. He must have noticed I was still in my wedding dress, though it was admittedly so simple it could have been mistaken for a white silk evening gown.

“Good evening,” we greeted him.

“So, life goes on,” he answered. Antoine raised his eyebrows, not following.

“I’m sorry, what do you mean?”

“You haven’t heard the news?” We turned our full attention to the officer, the waiter not having come yet.

“No, we got married less than an hour ago and came straight to the train,” I explained, wondering what the man meant.

“Germany just invaded Poland, apparently over a skirmish at the border. If the Germans don’t pull back, France and Great Britain will declare war on Germany, and we’ll be in another armed conflict,” the officer explained.

I was so shocked that Antoine put his arms around me and kissed my cheek.

The elderly man continued. “The president of the Republic and England’s prime minister have given Hitler three days to put down his weapons, but that Austrian corporal will never surrender. In short time he’s managed to grab up the Saar, Austria, a good bit of Czechoslovakia . . . and he won’t stop.”

“Well,” Antoine offered, “we all learned from what happened during the Great War. Nobody wants another conflict.”

The officer shrugged. “You didn’t fight in that war, young man. We won in the end, but the price was too high—such carnage, an entire generation gone. Things have changed, and the next war will be even worse. I’m a military man, but I swear I hate nothing more than fighting. It pains me for the younger men. We old men always start the wars, but the young men are the ones who die in them.”

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The waiter arrived, recommended a dish, and then brought a bottle of champagne. The dark news had dampened the mood, though. We hardly tasted the food and sipped the champagne without toasting, just to refresh the fear that had started to dry our throats.

An hour later, we undressed silently in our compartment. Every now and then the moonlight broke through the clouds and rain and shone through the window as the train sped to Paris. We kissed, and Antoine's tender arms made me feel more alive than I had ever been before.

"They'll call you to enlist. Surely there will be a draft," I said.

"Let's not think about it now. We just got married, we're going to Paris, and all we have is this moment," Antoine said, trying to calm my fears with his kisses.

We had no idea that dark years were piling up like storm clouds above. The strangest part was that everything seemed the same as it had been just a few hours before: the raindrops drumming against the train car roof, the rhythmic sound of the metal wheels on the rails, the fields and forests flying by in the grip of darkness.



The next morning, the train arrived in Paris. We had slept in, had a late breakfast of fruit, and watched the passing of the endless landscapes, rushing rivers, and towns that grew steadily larger closer to the capital. We passed through the city's outskirts, the dingy gray working-class neighborhoods, and middle-class neighborhoods with nice flowery yards until the great scenery of Balzac's *The Human Comedy* dazzled us. And that was the point, the reason the beautiful city of love was built: the dazzle.

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A porter helped us carry our luggage to an old, run-down taxi. A few minutes later the doors to the famous Hotel Ritz opened to receive us. The luxurious entryway was like a palace, with the spotless white awning, the concierge in jacket and top hat, the bellhops shuttling the suitcases of the nobility in golden luggage carts, and the middle class from the provinces come to the city for the adventure of a lifetime.

We walked along the blue embroidered rugs and by the cloud-soft velvet curtains with bright gold tassels. The receptionist assigned us a small room on the second floor. When the bellhop opened the door, Antoine once again picked me up in his arms, carried me over the threshold, and placed me gently on the bed.

“It’s so nice,” I said when we were alone. “Do you really think we can afford this?”

“No, darling, but we’ll only get married once. Today we’re alive and healthy, and that’s all that matters.”

After sinking into the ocean of linen sheets together, we showered and got dressed. We wanted to explore the bouquinistes before they closed. The riverside book stalls had flanked the Seine since the sixteenth century, withstanding church censorship, religious warfare, the French Revolution, Napoleon’s empire, and the Great War.

It was a pleasant, almost cool afternoon as we walked toward the river. Some of the wooden crates were already shut up, but we managed to flip through several books and bought a few volumes of François Villon, Charles Perrault, and George Sand. We found a nearby café and sat, reading snippets of the books and watching the Parisian foot traffic in the light of the sun that had finally managed to break through the clouds.

“I can’t believe how well preserved these are!” I said.

“They’re dead people’s books,” Antoine said to egg me on.

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“Books don’t have owners; they’re free agents we just happen to hold for a brief time. Look at this one, inscribed with a woman’s name and dated to 1874. But now I’m carrying it around, and maybe in another hundred years, another woman will be reading it. Every time someone opens a book, it comes alive once more. Its characters wake up from their nap and start acting all over again.”

“You’re always going on about *The Human Comedy* . . . I don’t know what you see in Balzac. He was a cheat, a word peddler.”

“But aren’t all authors?” I asked, my eyebrows raised. I did not like the way Antoine and the world of critics classified literature, relegating some as first-rate and the rest as second-class.

“Cheats or word peddlers?”

“Both.”

“Life itself is a scam, my dear. We’re born, we think we’re eternal, and then we disappear forever . . .”

My face grew stormy. I did not like talking about death. For Antoine, death was just an abstract idea, but for me, it was the dull reminder of my parents. My chest ached all of a sudden. I had been plagued by a cough for weeks, and sometimes I could not get enough air.

“Are you okay?” Antoine asked when my repeated throat clearing did not seem to help matters. He handed me a pristine white handkerchief, and I coughed into it. The fabric was spotted with red, but I shoved it into my pocket before he could notice. I did not want Antoine to worry. Death and illness nip at our heels from birth. To escape, we have to run faster and faster—and at the time, on that day in Paris, books were the only escape valve that could anesthetize my soul.



## Death's Embrace

Saint-Malo  
January 2, 1940

Winter seemed set on destroying Saint-Malo at all costs. Every morning, despite my illness, I bundled up as best I could, went up on the wall, and watched the waves pounding the ancient stone barrier between sea and city. The ocean refused to give up its centuries-long mission to flood the streets of the old fishing town founded by the Gauls. The doctor had suggested exposure to cold, clean air to improve my symptoms, but I was growing steadily weaker and often could not catch my breath between coughing fits. Then I would pull out Marie de France's medieval poem "Laüstic" and read while the chilled northern air and salty ocean spray freshened up my face. That story about two knights who love the same woman is heart-wrenching: the

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beautiful wife whose love toward her spiteful husband has grown cold, and her chaste lover who is content to talk with her through the window on warm summer nights. At the time it was a metaphor for my own illness. When the woman's husband suspects something, she says she is spending nights in the garden listening to a nightingale. So he orders the bird to be captured and shut up in a cage. When the woman begs him to free it, the man kills the bird and hurls it at her, staining her dress with blood—blood just as red as that which flowed out of my nose and mouth.

That morning, the roaring of the ocean distracted me from reading. I pulled my coat tighter around me and walked with the little book in my pocket toward the library. Our apartment was a few hundred yards from the Hotel Désilles. I opened the door and went in. I knew few would come by in that weather, but I preferred the company of books over the solitude of our apartment.

I hung my coat on the wooden hook. The light was on, and Céline Beauvoir was already sitting at her desk. She had retired the year before and left the management of the library to me, but she could not keep herself from spending the mornings in the building, helping me with the card catalogue or repairing damaged volumes.

“Why are you out on a day like this?” she asked. “You’ve got to take care of yourself. Health is a treasure we really can’t afford to waste.”

“And it’s precisely one I don’t have,” I answered, slumping into my desk with a hard-won breath.

“At least you’ve got your youth. This tuberculosis won’t take you down. Have faith.”

“I wonder about faith,” I said, putting on my glasses and

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revising the list of overdue books. Céline was a very devout woman, something beyond my comprehension. Faith had always been at odd with books, in my view.

“Was your family not Christian?” she said.

Her question was so direct that I glanced away. I didn’t want her to see my confusion. “Yes, both sides were from a long Huguenot saga. I went to church all the time when I was little, but I left the faith after my parents died. My aunt sent me to a school run by nuns, but their rigor convinced me that truth was in books.”

The older woman smiled, her deep inner peace radiating out. “Books certainly help us ask the right questions, but they rarely give us the answers, my friend.”

I lowered my head and immersed myself in the tomes piled high on my desk. Now that Antoine would certainly be drafted, with my illness growing worse and war in the air all around, I did not want to think about death or what it might mean.

The door chimed and a boy no more than thirteen years old entered. He was wearing school uniform shorts despite the cold that was blowing all outside the library walls.

“Mrs. Ferrec, Denis the bookseller has sent me.”

I smiled at the young man, who just looked at me, uncertain, for a few moments.

“Yes, go on,” I encouraged him.

“The bookseller, Mr. . . .”

“Yes, I know him.”

“He told me that libraries are the poor man’s bookstore. I like to draw, and maybe you have some books about sketching and painting.”

I pointed to some shelves. For the uninitiated, the library can be an undecipherable labyrinth, but ours actually followed an

orderly circular design: the oldest books were in the center, and the most valuable were locked away.

“Thank you,” he said.

“After you choose one or two, you’ll give me your name and address so I can make a card for you.”

The boy walked gingerly to one of the shelves and stared with his mouth open at a volume. He took it to one of the study tables and spent the rest of the morning poring over it, oblivious to everything around him.

Céline came up to me and smiled. “I hope I haven’t offended you. I didn’t mean anything with my questions. I just wanted to cheer you up, and sometimes hope is the only thing preventing us from going crazy. Life is so full of trials, and I can assure you I haven’t found any anchors that reach to the bottom of the depths.”

“Thank you, Céline. You aren’t a bother in the least. It’s just that whenever I talk about religion, I remember my unfortunate parents. They left for vacation and never came back. When we lose someone in such a way, we’re stuck with the feeling that they’ll come home at any moment.”

“Being an orphan is one of the hardest things in the world to get over, especially if it happens when you’re young enough for the whole universe to revolve around your parents. We live through the deaths of others more by fear than sadness. It makes us feel insecure, knowing the past doesn’t exist anymore and at the core it’s just a story we tell ourselves.”

“I’m scared.” The words escaped in a whisper as I started to cry.

“We’re all going to die, dear. No one escapes it.” Céline patted my shoulder with her chilled, bony hand.

“That’s easy to say when you aren’t in the middle of dying.

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Do you have any idea what it feels like? Every night I close my eyes scared I'll never open them again. Death is the end; I won't feel anything else after that, never get to see the ocean and the big gray clouds and this wonderful room full of books."

"You're right. I hadn't considered that. And yet I think we avoid thinking about death too much. Doing so scares us. But getting old is a way of dying little by little until you let your spirit abandon your weak, sickly body in one final breath."

"I'm not ready for that," I said, my voice choked with tears. "These books and Antoine's love are the only things keeping me on my feet. We spend every afternoon in the sunroom drinking tea and reading together. Sometimes he stops and looks up, stretches out his hand and takes mine, like he's trying to make sure I'm still here. Then we go on reading, each of us in our own book, holding hands. Mine are always cold and his nice and warm, 'til the sun goes down and I have to face the night alone."

"Child, don't live in the past or fear the future. Just stay right here in the present, where the sun is always shining."

The boy crept up to us. The book he carried seemed to make him float through the air, and the ancient hardwood floor did not even creak to give him away. His unvarnished face shone with life and future, and I envied him for a breath. Then he smiled. His youthfulness returned me to the immediacy of a day's work.

"May I take this one? My name is Pierre . . ."

I smiled and filled out a card for him, and he went on his way. The rest of the morning went by quickly, which is what I liked most about going to work. Staying home tended to make me feel useless and invalid.



**Mario Escobar**

Back at home, I stopped in front of a pastry shop and admired the delicacies in the window. I bought a few, and on my way home devoured one. The taste delighted and distracted me for a passing moment. Then I dragged myself up the stairs, fighting for every breath and hoping Antoine was already home so we could sit by the window and read. Books lightened the pain in my soul and stood guard before the advancing embrace of death. The cloth-bound cardboard covers made me invulnerable and immortal, like the characters on the pages within.

# 3

## The Draft

Saint-Malo  
February 7, 1940

Many people called the conflict a “phony war,” but I could tell they were wrong. The Soviets had taken over half of Poland while the Germans occupied the other half. Rumors swirled about prisoners being treated terribly and Germans forcing Poles out of their homes. The Soviet Union, encouraged by the impunity of their actions, had invaded Finland, and people feared the Germans would do something similar in Denmark and Norway. And we started to wonder what would happen when the Nazis turned their cannons toward us. Yet in those days, what I worried about most was my declining health.

One morning, after an exhausting and interminable coughing

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spell, Antoine decided to call for Dr. Paul Aubry, one of the best doctors in town.

As soon as the bell rang, Antoine rushed to answer the door and speak with the doctor. I knew he was deeply worried and wanted the doctor to know all about the progression of my disease. They thought I was resting in bed, but I was awake and heard the whole exchange.

“Dr. Aubry, Jocelyn is worse. She can’t stop coughing, and I can tell she’s losing her strength every day. I’m really worried about her.”

“I understand. Tuberculosis is a dangerous disease, but in young, healthy individuals like your wife, with the right care . . . The vaccine is effective in children but not in adults who have already contracted the disease. Research for a cure is ongoing.”

“Do you think it would be better for her to visit a recovery home? She doesn’t get any rest here. She wants to return to work and pushes herself to keep the house in order.”

“Your wife is very strong, and maintaining her activities will help her. Most illnesses are fought more with the will than with medicines. As long as she’s stable, it’s best not to remove her from the environment she’s accustomed to. The air of our city is pure and fresh. I’m confident she’ll begin improving soon. Within a few months she may very well return to life as normal. In the meantime, though, find someone to help with the housework so she won’t worry herself with it.” The doctor spoke in such a peaceful, soothing tone that the comfort reached even me.

Over the months, I had thought a lot about my death. I felt my life was slipping away from me with each cough and each drop of blood that came from my throat. I had hardly touched Antoine for months, much less kissed him. My skin was so pale it had taken on grayish hues, and my bones were beginning to

show. I looked like my flesh was eating itself and my body was wasting away.

I had not been able to work at the library for over a month, and in my long mornings in bed I read *A Confession* by Leo Tolstoy. His life and mine could not have been more different. The Russian author was an overcomer—hot-blooded and irascible—while I tended toward melancholy and introspection; but his words were good for me. It is not normal for a person so young to think about death so much, but I was obsessed with the idea. Sometimes everything has to come crashing down for us to understand what we have built our lives upon. Mine was set on a foundation of my love for Antoine, my passion for books, and my dedication to the townspeople of Saint-Malo. I longed to be a mother and dreamed of becoming a writer, but none of that mattered at the moment.

Socrates's words grew clearer and clearer in my day-in, day-out existence: we get closer to the truth the more we are freed from the "folly of body."

Antoine came into our bedroom, followed by Dr. Aubry, whose pleasant smile brought me out of my reverie and back into the world of flesh and blood.

"You seem to be looking better, your face more full of life," he lied to encourage me, but I chose to believe him. Invalids do not care if people lie to us so long as they make us feel better.

"Thank you, though I know I look terrible," I said, smoothing down my hair.

"You're the prettiest starfish in the ocean," Antoine said, caressing my forehead. I drew back, fearful of infecting him.

"I hope you'll be able to get out of bed in a few weeks. Keep the window open as much as possible. The pure ocean air is the very best medicine."

Mario Escobar

I curled up between the blankets, but I could never get warm enough. The air cut through the fabric like wind filling sails on a boat adrift.

“How is the war going?” I asked the doctor impatiently. Antoine tried not to speak of it around me. I knew he would be called to serve any day now, and I had no idea what would become of me when he left. His family did not hold me in overly high regard. At least I still had Denis, who would come by after shutting up the bookstore and read poetry aloud while I stared at the patch of sky I could see from the bed.

“Some think the Germans will try to reach an agreement. The British are none too eager to start a full-scale war, and our government—well, you know, it’s a mess of pacifists, communists, and social climbers who haven’t yet come up with a response. Just look at how they handled the Spanish refugee crisis. Totally overwhelmed and always making things up as they go.”

“The situation isn’t easy for anyone,” Antoine said. He was less conservative than the good doctor. These two visions of France—and so many more—that had always been at odds now flared up as danger closed in. “The world has gone mad.”

The doctor nodded once. “I must get to the hospital, so I’ll be going. They’re drafting all the younger doctors, and we’re doubling up on shifts. If not for that change, I would hardly be able to tell we are at war.”

Dr. Aubry headed for the hallway, and Antoine walked him to the door. Moments later he was standing by the bed again.

“How are you?” he asked, hoping I would answer in the positive.

“It’s natural to want to live . . .”

“You’ve been reading a lot of philosophy lately. Schopenhauer

is not necessarily a great pick-me-up. Surely things will get better once winter is over.”

“Sometimes I think my life is a cruel joke. An orphan all alone in the world with nothing to my name, and the very day my happiness returns, I get sick and now am on the brink of death.” My tears fell as I spoke.

“Jocelyn, we’re going to get through this. By the time I’m back all of this will be over.”

My eyes darted to meet his own. “When you get back?” Then I saw the envelope sticking out of his jacket pocket. All day I had sensed he was a bit off, but I assumed he was just worried about me.

“I’ve been called up. Yesterday I went before the draft board and explained our situation, but the infantry is short on non-commissioned officers, and I’ve got a policeman’s experience with weapons. There’s nothing else I can do.”

“Nothing? You can disobey. The state can’t take you away from your dying wife. It’s immoral!”

“If we lose this war, who’s going to protect you when the Germans come? This is my duty.” Antoine’s voice was charged with grief. Though he’d been a policeman his whole career, my husband despised violence.

I closed my eyes and turned away from him. He remained standing by the bed for a while but eventually heaved a sigh and left me. I heard him shut the door and go out to the street, probably going to a café or to see a friend and have a glass of wine and forget everything happening in his world.

I struggled to sit up and dress myself, and my weakness became abundantly clear as soon as I was on my feet. I was in a cold sweat, hands trembling, and I hardly had the strength to stay upright. I took my coat from the rack by the door, my hat, and