

Albert Walks

by Maud Casey

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When Albert walks he is astonished. Ripe fruit falls to the ground at his feet, offering itself. The earth's tremor rumbles, celebratory, through his mended shoes and up his shins. The birds darting through the sky above him? Utterly bird. They *are*. They are *here*. He *is*. He is *here*, elemental as the birds' shadows. To keep from being afraid, he says to himself, *Fascinating!* Or, *magnificent!* Or, *Yet another escapade!*

He cuts a swath through the end of the century full of invention and possibility. He zigs and zags through France, East Rumelia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Austria-Hungary and always, eventually, home to Bordeaux. Seventy kilometers per day, except for the cattle car from Warsaw to Moscow. "Siberia? Magnificent! I've never been," he said to the baffled Russian soldier who took him prisoner. He was marched to Constantinople instead.

The Doctor draws a crude map of Albert's peregrinations and holds it up to Albert who tilts his head, purses his lips, and says, "How curious."

In the Doctor's notebook: *It is difficult to know whether someone is telling the truth in professing oblivion.*

When Albert stops, he goes dark with forgetfulness. He doesn't remember where he's been. He doesn't remember that he was ever astonished at all.

Shh, Albert, shh.

Hypnotism is dreaming together. The Doctor's voice becomes the world and there is a spark in Albert's dark, forgotten heart, like the lit fuse of a gas lamp, illuminating blood and muscle.

When they dream together, the Doctor tells Albert his lost life: Listen, your father was a gas fitter for the Municipal Gas Company. Listen, your brother died of meningitis. Listen, you had your mother for nine years and then pneumonia.

Shh, Albert, shh.

Sometimes the Doctor's voice is inside Albert's head, dreaming Albert's ragged memory: Listen, your finger dipped in a honey pot in the foothills of the Pyrenees (*Yet another escapade!*), thick amber drawn by industrious bees from the nectar of tiny flowers that defied rough soil. In a public square in Pau, a man with large kind ears told you about healing herbs so rare they only have names in Catalan, how the nectar of the defiant flowers hold an ancient cure. On each of the honey pots was written *les petits pharmiciens*. Little doctors! (*Fascinating!*) You sucked your honeyed fingers for the sweet, ancient cure but the urge to walk was still lodged in your bones. When the bees swarmed, you ran down the hill, trampling the healing herbs you couldn't name, shouting to no one, Make me real! I am not real!

A note pinned to Albert's coat when he arrived: I think he is off his rocker. Still, he cries himself to sleep. 'Travel' from a Latin word for a three-pronged stake used as an instrument of torture.

"I will watch over you. You will not leave Bordeaux. You will come see me tomorrow." The Doctor blows gently on Albert's eyelids to wake him. In the harbor, boats bob and tug at their anchors. Horses clop-clop down narrow streets. Another basin clatters in the hall. With the Doctor's phantom breath on his eyelids, it all seems quite beautiful to Albert.

In Lyon, he saw the funicular railroad (*Magnificent!*) In Trappe de Staoüel, there was the delicate fragrance of the rose water manufactured there (*Fascinating!*). He had been to Kassel to the castle where Napoleon II was held prisoner (*Yet another escapade!*). He walks and walks. He is astonished. He cannot walk enough.

The hospital lives in the cool shadow of a cathedral; it was once an institution of the Church. In the Middle Ages, pilgrims sought refuge here on their way to the tomb of St. Jacques. The Doctor will wish fleetingly that he were a man of the church and not a man of science so the answer would simply be God.

Fugue means flight. Diagnoses are stories: Fugueur.

Listen. Your father always replied sternly: It isn't a miracle, Albert; it is science. The chaos of gas contained in a perfectly fitted pipe.

When Albert walks, his sadness drifts into the clouds and is transformed into rain that spills from the branches of spindly poplars turned pale gold with winter coming. *Il revient, il revient, il revient*, sing the river Garonne, the Gulf of Lyon, the Rhône, the Tarn. Each time, he looks back to see the slated roofs. Bordeaux is never more his home than when it disappears behind him. The size of his forearm, the size of his finger, the size of his fingernail. Gone. That darting bird and then that one and then that one are the Doctor watching over him, making him real.

