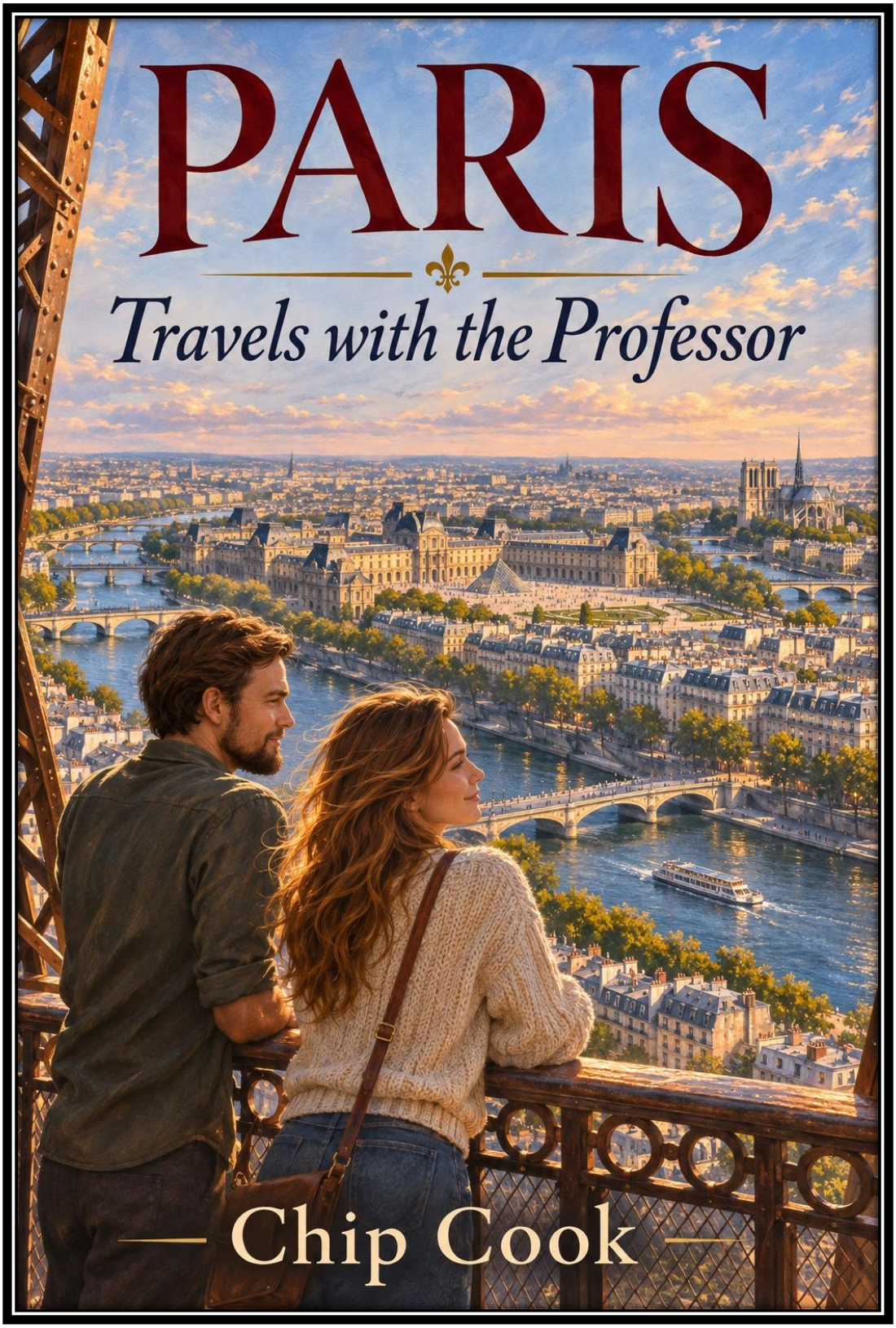

PARIS
Travels with the Professor
— Chip Cook —

Still Thursday

“Ah, Professor, what are we now?”

“We’re pure imagination. It’s very transformative.”

Lumen looked down at her shoes. “I don’t seem to be a mermaid any longer.”

“Oh, you could be, if you want to be. You’re free to be anything you want to be.” He thought about it. “I may regret that statement.”

“Are we ghosts?”

“I wouldn’t say ghosts. Being-shifters, perhaps. We can go anywhere. Anytime, too.”

It was still Thursday, the twenty-second. In Monhegan, somebody would be coming up the path before long, expecting to find them in. The Professor could still picture the little lamp beside the cottage door. They’d left it off.

“How long can we be away?” Lumen asked.

“A week at home, if we come back next Thursday. Out here, I suppose we could take a lifetime. We can let the days pass in Paris and still choose which Thursday we return to.”

“Where would you start?”

“Paris. I used to love it.”

“Used to?”

“I’ve not been back often enough to know how much it changes. Sometimes I don’t see the change until I get home.”

Lumen held out her hand. “Show me the street you remember.”

Number Forty-Nine



Arrival at the Hôtel du Palais Bourbon on Rue de Bourgogne.

“There it is,” he said. “My little hideaway.”

Lumen waited for him to cross. He stayed where he was, looking at the windows.

“The first time you came here with your mother?” she asked.

“In 1992. My father had been dead three weeks. I pushed Mom through Paris in a wheelchair. Years later I pushed my wife, Joan, in the same chair. Sometimes I’d come to a curb and remember exactly how I’d gotten the wheels over it the first time.”

A woman hurried past with a baguette under her arm. The Professor shifted to let her by. Then he crossed the street.

Your Father

The woman at the desk glanced up. Her smile came easily. Then she looked again, and her fingers rested on the open register without turning the page.

“You look exactly like your father!”

He had almost said, “You remember me.” He could still feel the words waiting in his mouth.

“He was very fond of this place,” he said.

“He always wanted to know who was still here.”

She turned the register toward him. Lumen let him decide what to write.

In the morning they went downstairs for breakfast. The little room was tight enough that Lumen had to pull in her chair to let the coffee pot go by. There was bread and jam, and honey that stuck to the spoon. The woman remembered how he took his coffee. She set it down without asking and then seemed surprised at herself.

“In Ogunquit,” he told Lumen after she’d gone, “people used to come into our family movie theatre to see if I was still there. They’d ask how I was and go away without buying a ticket. I used to wonder what they wanted.”

“Did you find out?”

“I think they wanted their Ogunquit. I walked in here yesterday wanting my Paris.” He buttered his bread. “I was so glad she was still at that desk. I wonder what she’d have liked to be doing on a Thursday.”

The Garden at the Musée Rodin

They walked just down the street to the Musée Rodin. A delivery driver had left his door open and was finishing a coffee in the sun. From the sculpture garden, the Professor found the dome of Les Invalides above the trees.

“I painted it from here in 1988,” he said. “That was before the hotel visit with Mom.”

Lumen moved beside him, trying to see what he’d put inside the frame. “Did you paint the sculpture, too?”

“Wait till you see it. You can tell me what I left out.”

They looked at the dome for a while. Lumen watched a visitor step back from a bronze so the stranger beside her could see.

Inside the museum, Lumen circled Rodin’s The Kiss. From one side she saw the man’s hand resting on the woman’s thigh. From the other she saw how far the woman had leaned toward him.

“Paolo and Francesca,” the Professor said. “Rodin found them in Dante. Their story ends badly.”

“Then I’m glad he stopped here,” said Lumen. She went around once more. “I thought he was the one leaning in. Look where her arm is.”

At the Louvre

At the Louvre, they stopped at the Venus de Milo, found on the Greek island of Milos. She was missing her arms, but it didn't matter. "Look how soft she looks," said the Professor. "As if she were alive." He thought of the centuries it took Greek sculptors to learn how to give stone that ease. The Winged Victory of Samothrace had the same quality. He could almost feel the wind pressing her clothes against her body. He admired the Roman artists who carried on the Greek tradition, though few works gave him quite the same feeling. Michelangelo's marble did.

The Professor had meant to show Lumen his favorite things in the museum. By the time they left, he'd given up trying to choose. "Art feeds the imagination," he said. "Look at how people learn to show a hand resting on a shoulder, or two people reaching toward each other. You can see them finding ways to express what they understand about one another."
"Like the woman in The Kiss," said Lumen. "She had something to say, too."
"And you noticed it before I did."

In one room he'd caught himself watching a painted hand on someone's shoulder. In another he'd watched a father lift his daughter so she could see.

Out on the street, a florist turned a pot a quarter turn before stepping back to look. Lumen stopped to watch her.

"Still in the museum?" the Professor asked.

"Look how carefully she does that."

"She loves doing that," Lumen said.
"Yes. You can feel it, can't you?"

The Professor looked along the street. "Sometimes I think the whole city is whispering, 'We are Paris!'"

Winged Victory



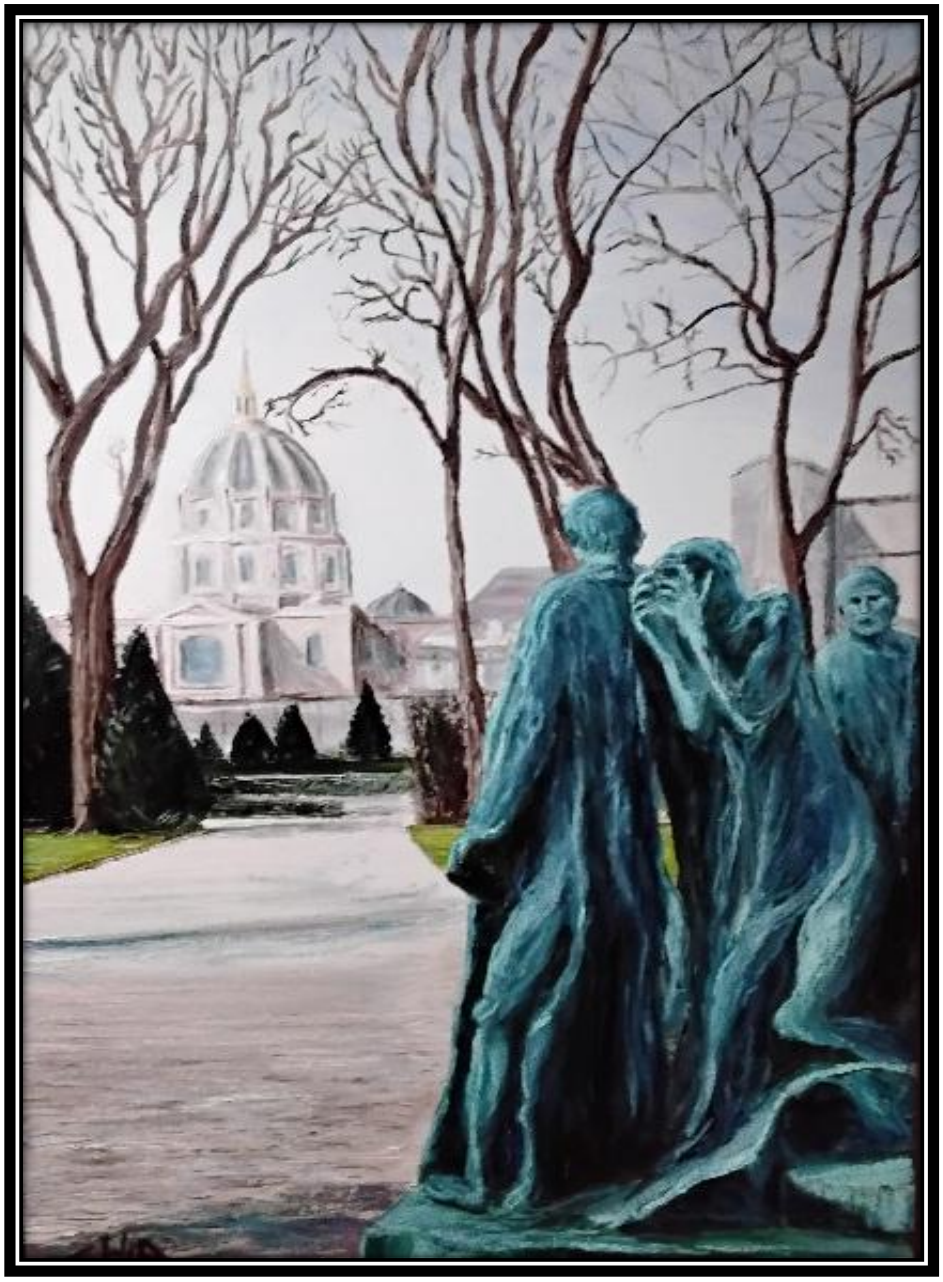
Lumen lends Nike a smile at the Louvre.

Sometimes you just have to let a mermaid be herself. She is going to do just what she wants to do anyway. Roll with it, besides you can always just fly away if things get out of hand. That is the power of our imagination. I would not put wings past her. They actually look as good as her flippers. What if we combine them?

“Now Professor! I can imagine what you are thinking. Stop that!”

“You’re the one floating around the Louvre.” He laughed.

The View from the Rodin Garden



Les Invalides from the Musée Rodin garden, with Rodin's The Burghers of Calais on the right. Painting by Chip Cook – 1988

"Oh, Professor, your painting of Rodin's garden is very nice," said Lumen.

"Thank you for saying it, but I will always be a student of art. Not what I consider a real artist to be. However, study the geometry."

Two Views of Concorde



Place de la Concorde with an imagined glimpse of the Revolution.

At the other end of Rue de Bourgogne they came to the National Assembly. They crossed the Seine to the Place de la Concorde. The Professor stopped at the edge of the square and let the traffic pass. The traffic fell quiet. When Lumen looked again, a crowd in old coats stood where the cars had been. Above their heads was the bare wooden frame of a guillotine.

“This was where the Revolution literally drew blood. The rich had been getting richer, with little regard for the poor. Something had to give. Believe it or not, Dr. Guillotin argued that a quicker execution would be more humane. The machine took his name, though he neither invented it nor died by it.”

“Can they see us?” she asked.

“I don’t know. However, don’t lose your head over it.”

“Ah, Professor, that is not funny.”

“I’m sorry, I could not help myself.”

The Man in the Crowd

One man in the crowd was looking at the pavement. The Professor found himself watching him until the cars came back.

“Could we have walked back into that time?” she asked.

“Yes, but would you have wanted to? When time-tripping, it’s best to be prudent.”

“I think I could walk back as far as the man looking at his shoes,” Lumen said.

“What would you say to him?”

“I’d ask what he came to see.” She watched a cyclist slip between two cars. “Then I’d ask what he wished he hadn’t seen.”

The Professor looked down at the curb. “I wonder which question he’d answer first.”

The Way Through

The square had gone back to its ordinary noise. The Professor thought of the quiet path to his cottage. “Someone may be knocking on our door by now,” he said. “We should have left a note.” Lumen slipped her hand into his. For a moment they stood without moving.

“Protesting has become a way of life here. If the fishermen have a complaint, they come here with trucks loaded with fish and the fish are dumped. When the dairy farmers want to press a point, milk gets dumped onto the street. You get the idea. I’ve never been here without some kind of protest.”

As they walked back toward the river, the Professor told Lumen about a Paris protest he’d once walked into. The police had dogs. The shouting was getting closer. The crowd of teenagers was growing louder. He, Henry, and Linda were trapped in the center of the protest. Then a door opened and an old couple stepped out.

“I fell in behind them. The crowd parted. Like Moses on the Red Sea. So did the police line. Even the dogs just watched us go.”

“Did the couple know you were following?”

“I never asked. I was afraid they’d stop. Once again, we were very lucky. We just continued to walk up to our hotel. An average day of people participating in politics in France.”

“Was there a guillotine nearby?” She smiled.

“I don’t know, I was too busy following the old couple.”

By the Seine



The Professor and Lumen pause at the parapet.

“Once a mermaid, always a mermaid,” said Lumen, leaning a little farther over the stone wall.

“I know,” said the Professor. “That’s why I’m holding your sleeve. I wouldn’t try that water.”

“I was only looking.”

“You took your shoes off.”

“I like to look with my feet.”

“This is not Monhegan.”

The Left Bank



Bookshops and café tables in the Latin Quarter.

The old student quarter was full of visitors. A rack of postcards narrowed the pavement, and two people trying to get around it in opposite directions gave up and laughed. Lumen slowed at a bookshop whose stock had spread into crates on the pavement.

The Professor bought a banana and Nutella crêpe. He managed three bites before the filling escaped through the paper.

“You used to come here as a student?” Lumen asked.

“I used to come here with a better grip on my lunch.”

“Why is it called the Latin Quarter?”

“In the old days, the students spoke Latin even while just hanging out.”

Look Up



A morning walk beneath the Eiffel Tower.

“Eyes on the Eiffel Tower, Professor.”

“I’m beginning to understand why they built it so tall.”

A mother was helping her little boy pee by a boxwood hedge. The Professor looked away and saw another mother helping her child do the same thing on the other side of the walk. “Nothing’s changed,” he said. “I once saw the very same thing on this walk. By the end of that day, Henry had been through a car wash with his trousers down.”

“In a car?”

“In a public toilet. He thought he could get two visits for one euro. The wash cycle started with him still inside.”

“Did he get his money’s worth?”

“From the waist up, certainly. I love Paris, but there is a real problem with toilets.”

What the Camera Kept

Over lunch the Professor told Lumen about 1971, when he and Bill had a car and offered a newly graduated young Australian lawyer a day in Paris. That evening near the Moulin Rouge, he suggested she pose with her foot against a wall. Her caption back home would read, “How I worked my way through law school.”

“What did the women there think of that?”

“They came running. We went running.” He paused. “We’d made a joke of their street work. I can see why they were angry. Think about it, their clients would be understandably camera shy.”

“Did she use the photograph?”

“It was her camera. I never saw what she did with it.”

The Professor had another story about a Left Bank lunch, this one with his sister. They’d ordered spaghetti and meatballs. From the smell, he was sure the meat was horse. As a child, the same smell came from dog food in the refrigerator. He neighed and tapped one foot like a hoof. His sister’s expression suggested she’d have preferred the quieter sort of discovery.

“Did she finish her lunch?” Lumen asked.

“What I remember is the look she gave me. She wanted to call me a horse’s ass, but thought better of it. I’m sure she thought it would just encourage more antics.”

Le Stryge



Beside Le Stryge, with Sacré-Cœur on the distant hill.

The Last of the Bell

Lumen put her chin in both hands, just like the stone creature beside her.

“Have I got it?” she asked.

“Almost,” said the Professor. “You still look as if you expect something good to happen.”

A man carrying a coil of rope came around the corner. He stopped, looked at Lumen, and pointed to her left elbow. She shifted it a little.

He shook his head and moved his own elbow farther out. She copied him.

He nodded. Then he set down the rope and rubbed his shoulder.

The Professor started to speak. The man motioned for him to step out of the shadow so he could see his face.

“Are we in your way?” the Professor asked.

“Yes,” said Quasimodo. He picked up the rope. “But I’ve got a minute.”

Lumen straightened. “Do you ever get tired of the view?”

He looked out over the roofs. “I get tired of carrying the rope.”

She laughed. He saw her laugh and smiled.

A bell sounded above them. Quasimodo laid his palm flat on the stone. After a moment he beckoned to Lumen, and she put her hand beside his. She could feel the faint trembling under her fingers.

The note faded. She started to lift her hand. “Wait,” he said. She put it back. There was a little more.

When the stone went still, Quasimodo picked up his rope. Lumen held the loose end while he wound it back into a coil.

“You can let go now,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “I was waiting till you had it.”

The Sergent Recruteur



The old tavern on Île Saint-Louis, as imagined from the Professor's memories.

The Professor stopped outside the tavern and looked up at the sign. Lumen got as far as the door before she noticed he hadn't followed.

"Are you waiting for someone?" she asked.

"No. I was thinking about two people I once sent here. One of them met an old friend over dinner and ended up with a job."

"What did you send them here for?"

"Dinner," he said. "I had no idea about the job."

They went downstairs. The Professor ducked under the brick arch a good foot before he needed to. Lumen waited until they were seated to tell him.

The Basket



Vegetables and cheese beneath the brick arches.

The waiter set a basket of carrots and radishes between them, then found room for the cheese. The Professor reached straight for a radish.

“Did you always order those?” Lumen asked.

“They brought the basket. I never had to order anything.”

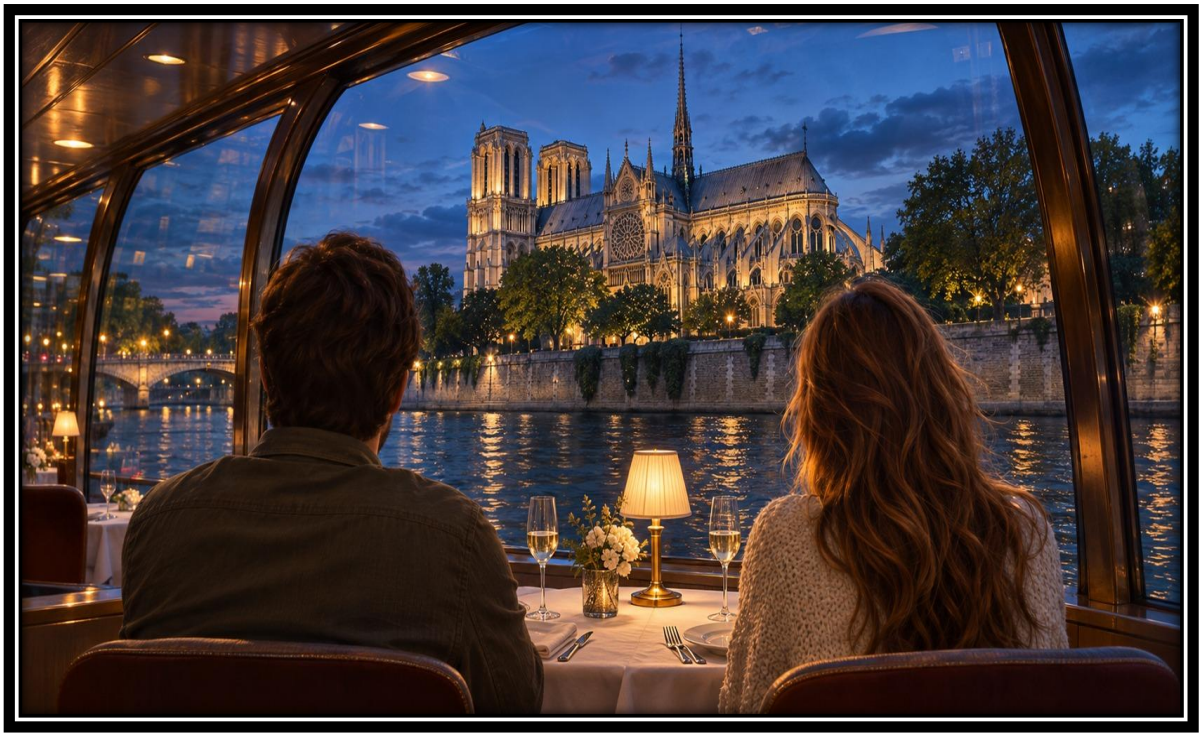
“How convenient. You can spend the whole evening thinking you made a choice.”

He broke off a piece of bread and offered her the bigger half. “I made that one.”

At the next table, a man pulled out an empty chair to make room for a late arrival. The Professor turned at the sound. For a second, Lumen thought he might be expecting someone after all. She passed him the basket. He took a carrot this time.

“Ghosts, that’s all. History is nothing but ghosts to me.”

Paris from the Water



Notre-Dame from the Bateaux-Mouches dinner cruise.

The next day, at the western tip of the Île de la Cité, they watched a fisherman wait for his line to stir. On the dinner boat, they sat beside each other facing the window. A small lamp stood between their glasses. Notre-Dame came into view, and Lumen waited to speak until the cathedral had begun to pass behind them.

“Do you think my voice tells you anything about my soul?”

“If we have souls. I have never met my soul. I don’t know if I would recognize it. I thought we might find out something about that along the way.”

“What did you hear in my voice just now?”

“That you wanted me to look at the cathedral before I tried to answer.”

She smiled. He was right about that much.

Next Thursday



Air Mermaid – The only way to fly, or swim. Homeward over Paris at dusk.

By the time they left Paris, the lights along the Seine were beginning to blur into one another. Lumen took the Professor's hand. There was a moment when he felt for a step beneath his foot. Then there was just air.

"This beats the airports…" said the Professor.

Lumen glanced back at the lights of Paris. "And I didn't have to put my shoes back on."

The Professor looked down. "You did, actually."

"Only because you said it would be cold up here."

In Monhegan, it would be Thursday when they got back. He wondered if anyone had remembered to leave the little lamp on.

The travels have just started.