

# Richard Revisited

*(original title: MESSIRE)*

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Translated by Laura Vroomen

## **PROLOGUE**

1. Jennifer

Jennifer turns her head to look at the feathers in the sky. Wispy trails, as if a world-spanning angel is slinking away behind the earth's atmosphere. From her bed by the corridor she has only a partial view. All she sees are cropped branches and some turning foliage. This is what we know of history, she thinks to herself: lines, nothing but lines. The sky in between elusive – millions of unconnected dots.

So much had been left unfinished in her career, not unlike those branches with their tops missing. At times it bothers her, although she knows that such a sense of shortcoming is quite common, especially when you're feeling miserable.

A murmur near the door and all heads turn. It's Hanif. After quickly acknowledging the other patients, he makes a beeline for her. 'How are you, my dear?'

'Fine. Just a temperature. Could you fill this cup?'

Her husband stands by the washbasin, his back straight. Upon his return he watches her drink.

'Won't you sit down?' she asks. 'Are you in a hurry?'

'No. Not in a hurry.'

She sees a hint of excitement on his face. His breathing is different. 'What's the matter?' she asks. 'Everything okay in India?'

'Patricia's absolutely fine.' The beginnings of a smile on his lips.

But she is still worried. 'How about Rupert? The grandchildren?'

'Don't worry, darling.' He pulls up a stool. 'I need to tell you something.'

'Something horrible?'

'No, something nice.'

She turns onto her left side. 'Tell me.'

'A skeleton's been found in Leicester.'

A skeleton. Whatever next? If it's a joke, it's a macabre one. She looks into his dark, serious eyes. 'Leicester....' A moment, then she gets it. An internal whirlwind, turning everything on its head. It feels like being in a tunnel with two trains whizzing past in opposite directions. The resulting vortex charges through joints and capillaries before grinding to a halt against her skin. A small pool of tears gathers in the corner of her eye and evaporates on the sheet.

'The car park? Where the monastery used to be?' She's gasping for breath. 'Underneath the choir of the Church of the Grey Friars?'

He looks at her tenderly.

'Tell me!'

He nods.

'Seriously?'

She has never seen such a broad grin on his face.

'We knew it!' For years, all their efforts had come to nothing. The Society knew from the records that after the monastery there had been a country estate with a mansion and a garden, which featured a column with an inscription. If, as some thought, it had been a monument to the lost King Richard III, this might be the place to start digging. There had been a lot of fund-raising activities. The negotiations with the council, which had its offices right next to the car park, and with the university, which initially reserved its archaeological department for more auspicious purposes, finally paid off. The excavations had started in the summer. Maybe it had gone so well, because none of the archaeologists had any expectations. Searching for a monastery church is one thing, but tracking down an individual? And now this... Hanif has a twinkle in his eyes.

'Oh, come on, will you!' she urges.

'Some more water?'

‘Could you draw the curtain?’ She doesn’t want to share this with the whole ward. With a gracious gesture to the others, Hanif slides the curtain along the rail. He sits down again and takes her hand in his.

‘Go on,’ Jennifer whispers. ‘What did they find?’

‘A skeleton, with the skull still attached.’

Her mouth is dry. His skull.

‘I’d just come in from the allotment, so I only caught the tail end of the radio news. I came straight over, so fast I almost knocked an old man off his feet at the roundabout. He was flailing about in shock. Your fault. You and your passions.’

She smiles and pulls the blanket up.

‘The skeleton lay squashed underneath the choir, where it’s thought to have been buried hastily in a hole that was too small.’

She closes her eyes. Buried under a plateau of gravelly black earth, which was then topped by a layer of tarmac. High-heeled boots, children’s sneakers and men’s brogues walking across you, car tyres gripping and letting go again. Day in day out. At first you yearned for the monks who lived their routine lives there. They spoke little, these men in their grey habits and hoods, weeding among the box trees. They plucked out the wild parsley and sang their psalms.

Hanif withdraws his hand. ‘You’re not feeling well. I’ll come back tonight.’

‘No, tell me!’

She has to draw it out of him. All her efforts to restore the fifteenth-century king’s reputation – and she wasn’t alone; so many had worked tirelessly – had been drops in the ocean compared to this. This is incredible.

‘What next? What did they say?’

‘They’ll be doing tests on the bones, comparing it to the DNA of descendants, to determine whether it’s really Richard III.’

That sense of unfinished business rears its head again, coupled with professional reservations. Research, yes. They're going to need hard evidence. She clings to the fact that the much-maligned last Plantagenet is back from oblivion. His skeleton anyway. Let's not blow it out of proportion. But will it make any difference? She knows full well that the establishment won't really do much as long as the most influential experts have a different opinion. 'Perhaps he'll finally be given the status he deserves,' she says.

Hanif caresses her cheek with his free hand. 'It takes months, that kind of DNA research.'

'That long?' They look at one another, while behind the curtain visitors come in with greetings, flowers and casual remarks. She gives his hand a quick squeeze, so he won't think she's too tired. 'Do you remember that court case for Channel 4?'

'Of course.'

It all happened a long time ago. A court case initiated by London Weekend Television and broadcast later that year. At last, there would be room for nuances. She and her colleagues had struggled, but she wouldn't hesitate to do it again. It was her field, so she had to. But now this news... Unbelievable. 'I just hope the newspapers don't get started on the two young princes again, murdered by King Richard – according to Thomas More, that is.'

'Thomas More wrote an essay on tyranny,' Hanif is quick to put things into perspective.

'But he focused on the wrong protagonist.'

They both smile. They're rehashing an old debate.

'Did you have a blood transfusion today?' Hanif asks.

'Tomorrow.'

He is quiet for a moment. 'You'll see, all your hard work will pay off,' he then pleads with her. 'Both physically and historically. The discovery of those bones will bring about a sea change.'

'But a skeleton has no voice.'

‘Jennifer! It’s not exactly an everyday occurrence for the earth to concede something, to yield up a secret. And now a king who’s been dumped like a common criminal, someone you’ve been working on your entire career, suddenly re-emerges – during your lifetime!’

She nods. Imagine, after five centuries during which mankind continued to evolve, wrote books, composed music even more beautiful than your own commissions, put new heroes on the stage and went on to invent electricity, you hear the piercing noise of a drill. While the area is cordoned off with tape, flapping playfully, almost mischievously in the wind, pickaxes chip away at what’s left of foundations. The scraping of special knives and then the cautious, almost tender advance of some small brushes. The workers’ fluorescent yellow vests are dimly visible through the tarmac. Judging by the voices around the enclosure the excitement is mounting. Lips are being pursed, hearts are pounding – even the most cynical ones. People get out of their cars, scientists who have decided to pop by now there may be months of research in store for them. Against the background rumble of lorries removing contaminated soil and the now useless chunks of stone, car doors are slammed shut in eager anticipation

Through the din she hears Hanif’s voice. ‘Your temperature’s gone up.’

‘Do you remember any of the details?’

‘I’m sure it will be on the news again tonight. I’ll come and report straight away.’

‘Just sneak past reception.’

‘It’s an emergency,’ he chuckles. ‘Otherwise you’ll have to wait till visiting hours. I couldn’t possibly do that to you.’

‘What else did they say?’

‘That he was lying there on his own. The lead archaeologist didn’t think there was much point in searching in that corner, but then they promptly located the choir. And there he was. With a strange curvature of his back.’

‘Because the space was too small,’ she reckons. ‘But underneath the choir. The Grey Friars knew who he was.’ She tries to picture her own skeleton. Back in those days nobody knew what you looked like on the inside, despite the many men and boys rotting in the mud. After Richard had fallen at Bosworth, an immense wave of sadness swept through towns and villages. In the grip of a cold despair, horsemen galloped in all directions, bearing the shocking, dreadful news. Shepherds, grandmothers, clerks and craftsmen covered their eyes, while in the castles the mirrors were hung with velvet.

She shakes her head. ‘I bet the press is saying that Shakespeare was right.’

‘Yes, they are.’

She turns over onto her back, with some effort, because the bedding and her nightie are moist with sweat. Hanif studies her hand, which is still lying in his.

‘There’ll be conferences,’ she says. ‘You’ll see. Sooner or later justice will be done.’

‘Go to sleep, darling, you’re burning up.’

‘I’m cold actually.’

He gets to his feet. ‘I’ll be back tonight.’

‘Leave your warm hand with me.’

‘I’ll bring it back later.’

‘How weird... George Buc... You remember, don’t you?’

‘Who?’

‘George Buc, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.’

‘I’ll pour you some more water. Will you be all right?’

‘Listen Hanif, this is important... Buc was rumoured to have written a letter criticizing Thomas More and Shakespeare.’

‘I see...’

She clutches his sleeve. 'It's entirely possible! George Buc was Master of the Revels, so he knew what he was talking about. And I don't mean his historical research, but something he did on the side. You know I searched the archives for it.' She rubs her wrist back and forth across her forehead. '....Never found it.'

The curtain gapes a bit. Cold air, not something she wants. She feels a kiss on her cheek. All those years spent searching. And now, in her mind, she is rifling through them again, the shelving units full of documents.

'You hear me? Try to get some sleep. See you later.'

'If only I'd found that letter, everything would have been different.'

He inclines his head towards her. 'Perhaps everything *will* be different. Bye now!'

Currents of air near the door. New visitors. Did Thomas More ever feel remorse? While he was being held in the Tower he must have understood the world so much better than at the outset of his career... 'You knew you were wrong.' The sound of her own voice. A face poking through the half-parted curtain startles her. 'Sorry.' She manoeuvres back onto her left side, away from the noise. Away from the window too. Dusk is falling anyway. Perhaps Thomas More was able to glimpse the river from his cell. All she can see are thin grey curtains. Where they part she can dimly make out the frame of the wardrobe.