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Opening Extract from...

ASHES

Written by **Christopher de Vinck**

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Ashes

Dear Reader,

Many years ago, when I read with my students Eli Wiesel's book, *Night*, about the horrors of the concentration camps, a girl in class raised her hand and said, "I don't believe this is true. People wouldn't do this to people."

I thought about this girl for many years. Wiesel wrote "To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time." I asked myself "How can I add a small voice to the community of hope and goodness so that my student and all of us will remember and believe?"

When family members shared with me what it was like to live under Nazi occupation for four years, telling of bombs, destruction, the machine guns and the loss of human life, I felt compelled to write *Ashes*. It has taken me most of my life to develop the understanding to truly tell this story.

This novel, based on the desperate evacuation of Belgian refugees as they tried to outrun the Nazi invasion of May 10, 1940, chronicles the friendship between Hava Daniels a young Jewish woman and her friend Simone Lyon, and their attempt to run ahead of the Nazi planes, tanks and soldiers that poured into Belgium during World War II.

I wanted to write a book about one girl, Hava Daniels, one human being who, like Anne Frank, represents all who were sent to their deaths. It is one thing for soldiers to die in battle for what they believe or what they were sent to

fight for; it is another for 6 million innocent people to be shaved, stripped, gassed and thrown into the flames of the crematorium and reduced to ashes.

Wiesel wrote "...I believe it important to emphasise how strongly I feel that books, just like people, have a destiny. Some invite sorrow, others joy, some both."

I believe this book has a destiny, and I invite you to absorb both the joys and sorrows Hava and her friend Simone shared. I hope that this book has the old-world power to move people towards that soul that we all share.

Christopher de Vinck

Christopher de Vinck is a teacher, the author of twelve books and numerous articles and essays. His writing has been featured in The New York Times, the *Wall Street Journa*l and *USA Today*. He delivers speeches on faith, disability, fatherhood, and writing, and he has been invited to speak at the Vatican. He is the father of three and lives in New Jersey with his wife.

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Ashes

CHRISTOPHER
DE VINCK

"Who would ever think that so much
went on in the soul of a young girl?"
Anne Frank

Prologue

Terror. Pandemonium. Panic. Children wailed. People shouted, 'Get down! Get down!'

Brussels: a city consumed by fear. People rushed out of their homes, spilling onto the narrow streets, crashing into each other with suitcases and rumours about tanks crushing women, Nazis with bayonets, Antwerp to the north in flames. My father had said the invasion would happen. Where was my father now?

Like so many frightened people, I ran too. A man carrying a typewriter pushed me aside. I fell against a woman who asked if I had seen her daughter.

'Julie, she was just here, holding my hand. She was sucked up into the crowd. Do you know where my daughter is?'

I was swallowed into the mosaic of red shirts, blue trousers, cotton skirts. Clothes seeming to move in terror, not filled with people, but with ghosts floating inside the sleeves and coats. Ghosts with grey features, slackened jaws and hollow eyes.

I looked up and did not see clouds and spring leaves, but something much darker that seemed to shroud the entire city. Outstretched wings soared high above my head, and what looked like the belly of a dragon.

I broke away from the mob, pushing my way between men in

clogs and woman carrying crying children and baskets of bread, forcing my way towards Hava's house. I needed to get to Hava. Then I heard a low sound, a growl. The belly of the dragon dropped closer until it finally became a plane swooping down towards the street. Closer. Closer. Then, a burst of blinding light flashed from under the wings, spraying bullets all around me.

People called out and cried again and again, 'Get Down! Get Down!'

Bullets shredded the back of a man who managed to throw himself over a small boy who shrieked, 'Daddy!' A woman's jaw was severed from her mouth. Blood splashed onto my blouse. I fell to the ground, holding my arms. I wanted my father. I wanted Hava. I didn't know what to do.

Seconds later, the bullets stopped. The plane disappeared. All was silent for a moment, a brief moment, as if the world took a deep breath. And then there was a scream. It was almost as if the wheels of a train had locked and strained against the railway tracks, a high-pitched sound like the wail of metal against metal. Tragedy embodied that scream: horror, conveyed in a single, anguished cry.

A woman held a small girl in her arms. She wailed, 'Julie! Julie!' The little girl's arms dangled at her sides like winter vines. Her head lolled back, her legs were limp. The side of the girl's face and the cobblestones beneath my feet were streaked with blood. She was dead.

'Julie! Julie!' The woman moaned and rocked the child in her arms. She looked at me, as if to ask if I might save her daughter. 'Julie?' she pleaded. I looked at the small curls on the girl's shattered skull, turned, stumbled and skinned my knees. Blood dripped down my legs.

'Julie! Julie!'

I stood up. I ran. More people shouted. I ran on. The silence had been replaced with howls of grief and pain. Trams ground their way through the thick crowd. More planes flew overhead.

'Julie! Julie!'

The sound of the girl's name rose above the calls and cries of other people. I felt that the little girl was chasing me, blood rushing down her face.

I pushed my way forward, squeezing between shoulders, arms, legs, and bundles of clothing.

When I reached the other side of the square, I stopped and leaned against a building and looked back. Like ants whose nest had been disturbed, people stumbled over each other, desperate to save what they could. They carried photo albums, bags of sugar, money, anything to help them out of the city, out of the path of the monster; to help them carry out with them what they knew and who they were.

The Nazis were coming. Belgium was under siege.

Run! I thought. *Run! Run! They must not get me. They must not shoot off my arms*!

I knew Hava would be in her house. I knew that is where she would be.

I ran down a familiar side street. I could see the windows of Hava's home. They were dark.

Chapter 1

This is a war to end all wars.
Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, 1917

My father was a general, a major general, in the Belgian army. He didn't start that way. He had been a private during the First World War, an ordinary engineering student, who volunteered to fight for his country.

Everyone in Belgium knew about my father after the war. An ordinary student who became a private and who, it seemed, fought off the German invasion into central Belgium single-handedly.

In 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres, the German army advanced towards France, but was stopped by Belgian troops at the Yser River, helped by intentional flooding, which temporarily stopped the battle. When the brutal fighting began again, under heavy fire from across the river, my father ran to an army supply truck, grabbed a shovel and began digging a trench. His commanding officer yelled at him to get down, but my father refused. 'The flood waters will soon go down! We can build a trench and keep the Germans on the other side of the river! We

can save Belgium! *Vive la Belgique*!' And he kept digging.

Inspired by my father's courage, his commander ordered hundreds of soldiers to start digging too. Moments later, my father was shot by a sniper across the river and fell face-down into the trench. A bullet ripped through his left arm above his elbow, shattered the bone, tore out the other side and disappeared into the darkness. My father fell unconscious into the mud as blood drained quickly from the three-inch hole in his broken arm.

Thirteen hours later he woke up surrounded by white sheets, the smell of blood and urine, and the voice of a doctor saying to his nurse, 'Do you think I should cut it off from the elbow or from the shoulder?'

Assessing the size of the wound and the damage in the bone, the nurse replied, 'Just cut it all off.'

In the midst of the pain, and before the morphine, my father rolled his head slowly back and forth on the operating table and pleaded, 'Please, don't cut off my arm. Please…' And then he lost consciousness again.

In modern times, if my father had suffered a gunshot wound, doctors with their microscopes and microsurgical techniques could have repaired his arm. In 1915, the best they could do was respect his wishes, stitch him up, and save the arm, which became just a prop, a dangling appendage, for the rest of his life. I spent much of my life as a child terrified that one day I too would lose an arm and look like him.

Sixteen hours later, in a field hospital in Belgium, my father stirred, licked his lips, and asked for water. As he listened to the water gurgling from the jug to a glass, he reached across with his right hand and patted his left shoulder. Then he slowly began to

run his hand downward, against the gauze and bandages, down to his elbow, down slowly inch by inch, until he touched the tips of his cold fingers on his left hand. His arm was still attached.

When my father asked the nurses about the battle, they told him that, because of him, a half-mile trench, in places only 45 metres from Germans bunkers, had been built. He later learned that this section of Belgium sustained some of the bloodiest fighting in the war: 76,000 German casualties; 20,000 Belgian deaths. But because of the 'Trench of Death', as it became known, that had begun with my father's shovel, that one small section of Belgium never fell to the Germans and inspired all of Belgium to hold on and resist the German invasion.

At the end of the First World War, my father was awarded the Croix de Guerre, the highest military medal for service to his country. The king himself pinned it onto his uniform, and the newspapers announced his heroics on their front pages: NATIONAL HERO: SAVED BELGIUM WITH A SHOVEL. His name was engraved on the reverse side of the medal: Joseph Lyon – my father.

Part I. Neutrality 1939

Chapter 2

As Belgium struggled to recuperate after the devastation of the First World War, the country reminded all of Europe that Belgium was declared a neutral territory in 1831, and would continue to be a buffer between France and Germany.

I was 18 years old in 1939. My hair was brown. I had read *Gone with the Wind* in French, and my friend Hava Daniels found an advertisement for the film of Gone with the Wind in an American magazine, and thought Clark Gable, the lead actor, looked like Otto the baker. I spent the autumn going to the opera with Hava.

We were Flemish, but of course everyone in Belgium had to speak both Flemish and French. At one time all the officers in the army spoke French, and all the soldiers spoke Flemish. Poor Belgium: half-Dutch, half-French.

I wasn't interested in politics. My father was afraid I spent too much time reading novels. He worried that my legs would be weak because I didn't walk enough. He thought I would go blind because I read so often beside the dim parlour light. He was also disturbed when I said 'Damn it!', imitating an American seamstress in a book I was reading.

My mother had died when I was born. I cooked, mended my father's uniforms, kept the washerwoman busy, and said the rosary three times every night, on my knees before a statue of Mary that I kept illuminated with penny candles.

My father was destined for a military career. He had wanted to be an artist, painting miniature scenes of Belgian farmland onto porcelain plates, but his father had felt that this was nonsense and had sent him to military school where he excelled in mathematics. After his fame in the First World War, he completed a Communication degree at the University of Ghent, was appointed the Military Commissioner of Communications for the entire Belgian army, and was given the rank of major general.

To me, he was just my father.

Our typical days began at the breakfast table where, each morning, he would ask me questions about life. 'What would you do in a panic?' he asked once as he buttered his toast. I could hear the scraping of the knife on the hard bread.

'Run?' I teased.

He did not laugh. A major general in the Belgian army did not run.

'Simone,' he said as he raised the butter knife in the air, 'you will need to know this someday. Think of life as a sailboat.' He lowered the knife and looked at me as I sat in my seat with a cup of tea in my hand, anxious to run off to school.

'Pretend you're on a small sailboat on a lake. You are guiding the ropes to control the shape and direction of the sails, when suddenly a strong wind blows down from the mountain and begins tipping the boat over sideways and rocking you violently. What do you do?'

I was tempted to say that I would jump in the water and swim

away, but that was the same as running in fear. So I said, knowing he expected more of me, 'Push the sailboat into the wind?'

'Just let go of the ropes, Simone. Just let go and let the sails flap helplessly. The wind will no longer fill the sails, and the boat will quickly right itself so you can ride out the storm. remember, in a panic, just let go of the ropes.'

We would spend our evenings together too. One night, after supper, my father sat beside the fireplace with his military documents on his lap. I liked seeing him with a blanket on his knees, writing notes on the pages as I read in my chair beside him. After an hour, he stopped, looked up from his work and asked, 'What have you discovered in your book tonight?'

If I said something vague like, 'Something sad,' he'd ask me to be more specific.

So, I replied, 'Sister Bernadette has assigned us an English novel – *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens'. I'm at the part where Sydney Carton pretends he's Charles Darnay so that Charles is freed from prison, escapes the guillotine and is united with his love, Lucie.'

My father closed his papers. 'I remember a line from that book: *A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.*'

That is how my father and I got along. He asked serious questions, or shared something that he read or remembered.

On another summer evening, while we were sitting before the flames in the fireplace, he handed me the newspaper and said, 'Simone, you need to know what is happening outside your books. Here, read this.'

My father flattened the newspaper on my lap and pointed to

an article about Albert Forster. I stared at him blankly. He sighed.

'Albert Forster is in charge in Poland. He's a Nazi and calls Jews dirty and slippery. He's a monster, Simone. Look here at what he says: *Poland will only be a dream.*'

I looked up from the newspaper. Being an officer in the army, my father knew much about political and military events.

'That man wants to invade Poland,' my father said, as he lifted the paper from my lap and tossed it into the fire. He and I watched the paper smoke, turn black, and then flare up into orange flames.

I did not know then that the first torch of the war was soon to be lit, but my father knew. I did not know then that the monster of war was on its way to get me.

Many years later I would learn that two to three million Polish Jews and two to three million non-Jewish ethnic Poles would be victims of the Nazi genocide.

Chapter 3

Adolph Hitler, Chancellor of Germany, convinced his nation that its Aryan heritage was a superior branch of humanity and that they needed to expand for 'Lebensraum' *(living space). On 11April 1939 he issued the directive.* 'Fall Weiss' *– the strategic, planned invasion of Poland.*

The war crept up behind me like poison ivy, a slow progress that I didn't fully recognize or understand at first. The world didn't fully recognize it either. After the First World War, my father had told me that German society had collapsed under the burden of its defeat. When the Nazi Party took control, he told me, Hitler had made promises about the future and reminded people that they were superior beings: white, unique in intelligence, best prepared to rule over the weak … especially the Jews. And bit by bit, the Nazis began a slow, meticulous rearmament that was done at first in secret.

He told me that the Nazis promised a return of national pride and that Hitler orchestrated the largest industrial improvement the German nation had ever seen. I was mildly interested, but didn't really understand too much of what it meant at the time.

One summer afternoon I was bored. The sun was hot. I felt restless, so I went looking for something to read in my father's study. As I scanned the bookshelf, I found a six-year-old newspaper article tucked inside Thomas Mann's novel, *The Magic Mountain*. It was an article about Nazis burning books. An organization called the German Student Union had decided it was important to burn books in a public ceremony; books that didn't support the pro-Nazi movement.

The newspaper article quoted part of a speech given in May 1933 by Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda of Nazi Germany, to more than 40,000 people at a book-burning ceremony in Berlin:

> The era of extreme Jewish intellectualism is now at an end. The breakthrough of the German revolution has again cleared the way on the German path ...You do well in this midnight hour to commit to the flames the evil spirit of the past.

According to the article, Thomas Mann's novel was one of the 25,000 books committed to the flames to consume the 'evil spirit of the past'. I was horrified to learn that students my age had burned books, novels, plays, poetry. *How could it be?* I thought. I looked at my father's bookshelf, at all of those beautifully bound pages. I would have to ask my father about this. This could never happen here, in Belgium, could it?

As I refolded the article and placed it back inside the book, I heard a knock on the front door. When I opened the door there stood Nicole, our neighbour's eight-year-old daughter.

'Is Charlotte coming today, Mademoiselle Simone?'

'Yes, *ma petite*,' I said. 'Yes, in a few minutes. I'll get the carrot.'

Every Sunday afternoon, for as long as I could remember, Corporal Anthony De Waden, a soldier in the Belgian army, led a great white horse down the centre of our street, knocked on our front door, and asked, 'Is the general ready?' The army did not name its horses, but I called her 'Charlotte', and always brought her a treat.

I went back into the house for a carrot and when I returned, Nicole was spinning on the pavement in one of her made-up dances, twirling with excitement as her mother stepped out onto the street.

'*Bonjour*, Simone.'

'*Bonjour*, Madame Johnson.'

'I see you and Nicole are waiting for Charlotte again?'

Yes, she's a bit late, but Nicole has been entertaining me with her dancing.' The little girl twirled once more and bowed. Madame Johnson picked up her daughter and said, 'When we lived in America, Nicole took dancing lessons.'

'I learned the waltz,' the girl said as Corporal De Waden arrived with Charlotte.

He waved and asked, 'Is the general ready?'

Madame Johnson placed Nicole gently back onto the pavement, waved hello to the corporal and retired to her home just as I heard my father call out, 'Simone!'

'I'll be right back,' I said to Corporal De Waden as I re-entered the house.

I stood in the hallway shadows as my father walked down the stairs in his uniform. His medals hung like cherries. Gold buttons held his jacket tightly against his wide chest. White gloves covered his two hands. In his right hand he held his hat.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he extended his right arm and said, 'Mademoiselle Simone may join me outside, if she'd like.'

Major General Joseph Lyon hooked his good right arm under my left arm and escorted me out onto Avenue St Margaret, where Corporal De Waden, Nicole and Charlotte stood waiting. each Sunday I made sure that I wore a dress, stockings, and my church leather shoes to enhance the spectacle of the general and his daughter walking towards the large, white horse.

As my father placed his black boot into the stirrup and grabbed onto the saddle, Nicole and I fed the carrot to Charlotte. Corporal De Waden made sure the horse was stable, and that my father was comfortable as he adjusted his hat and slipped the reins into his gloved hands.

Every Sunday my father rode Charlotte through Parc de Bruxelles, the largest park in the city. People waved. In response, my father nodded his head, or gave a smart salute. Long live Belgium! – as my father sat erect in his saddle, a living monument in motion, galloping between the tulips, under the great elms, a visible reminder that the reins of victory, order, and law were held in competent hands.

As my father rode down the street, the corporal gave me a jaunty salute and a wink, and then stepped into a waiting car. Nicole thanked me for the carrot and disappeared into her house.

Chapter 4

It must be made clear even to the German milkmaid that Polishness equals sub-humanity. Poles, Jews and gypsies are on the same inferior level... This should be brought home as a leitmotiv...until everyone in Germany sees every Pole, whether farm worker or intellectual, as vermin.
Adolf Hitler, October 1939, Directive No.1306 of Nazi Germany's Propaganda Ministry

A few days later, at the end of August, there was a radio broadcast announcing that Russia and Germany had signed a neutrality pact. Hearing people in my neighbourhood speak about the war, I began to understand that more was happening in Germany than I had realized.

'Not again,' Madame Johnson said to the postman. 'We've already had one devastating war.' The priest in church quoted from the bible about putting on the armour of God so we could protect ourselves from the devil.

'Do we have a neutrality pact with Russia and Germany?' I asked my father that evening.

'Belgium is a peace-loving country,' my father said. 'We are neutral, yes, in the eyes of the world.' So, I was confident that

Belgium was strong and safe. And I felt stronger and safer because I already knew Hava Daniels.

I had met her at the Red Cross in the middle of July. My local priest had announced at Mass that the Red Cross needed volunteers to pack clothes for people in Poland. My father had told me there was a possibility that Germany would invade Poland, so I had gone to the Red Cross in part because I wanted to make a difference, and in part because I was afraid. I thought that perhaps, in my small, illogical way, I could stop the German army and the threat of invasion if the Polish people were warm, secure, and brave – and had the right clothes. I was properly clothed and secure, but never brave.

When I arrived at the Red Cross, women in white sweaters ushered me into a large room. At one end of the room a pile of used clothes nearly reached the ceiling. At the other end of the room trousers, skirts, blouses, and sweaters had been heaped on rows of long tables. Standing on both sides of the tables women pulled the clothes along, as if on a conveyor belt. They removed trousers that were ripped, or vests that were heavily stained.

A large woman with a carnival smile greeted me. 'We are happy to have the general's daughter,' she said, as she led me to one of the tables. 'This is Simone,' my escort said to no one in particular. 'She has come to volunteer for the day.'

Some of the women smiled; some ignored me. Hava, a girl who seemed to be about my age, turned from her work at the table, and, with a torn sock in her hand, looked at me and said, '*Bonjour,*' and then made room for me beside her.

I squeezed in between Hava and a woman who sneezed often and said, 'Bonjour.' And that was that – Hava and I became immediate friends.

I quickly learned that Hava was also 18 and was in love with the opera singer John Charles Tillman. When Hava and I walked down Rue De Ville after our day at the Red Cross, she, walking in bare feet, slapped her shoes on the railings in cadence with her voice: 'John–Charles–Tillman! John–Charles–Tillman!' She thought he looked like a prince disguised as a famous opera singer. Before he sang at the Royal Opera for the first time, Hava bought two tickets. 'He has come to Belgium to whisk me away with him,' Hava smiled, as she handed me a ticket the second time we met.

She was a girl who possessed enough adrenaline to climb the Eiffel Tower every sixty seconds and who lived with an imagination that spilled into poetic facts – her facts.

'John–Charles–Tillman. John–Charles–Tillman.'

'How do you even know what he looks like?' I asked.

'There are posters all over town announcing his appearance in the opera. He's American, born in Pennsylvania. Can you imagine what a place looks like that has the name *Pennsylvania*?'

I had seen those posters, without paying them much attention. When I looked again properly, I found that John Charles Tillman did, indeed, resemble a handsome prince: black hair; round, boyish face. The opera posters advertised *Salomé*, a story about the Princess Salomé at a time when people believed in prophets, not many years after the death of Christ.

'He dreamt of owning a rowing boat when he was a boy,' Hava said, as she stopped chanting his name. 'I read in a magazine that he loves boats. I love boats.'

'Since when?' I asked.

'Since John Charles Tillman carried me onto his yacht moored at the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour. So … can

you come? The opera house is across town. I'm not sure my father will let me go on my own, but with you there I might have a better chance. What do you think? Next Tuesday, 8 o'clock?'

'I think yes.' I smiled. 'What's the opera about?'

'Love and death – the usual story. There's a captain of the guard who's in love with *Salomé*, but Salomé loves someone else. She performs the dance of the seven veils.'

Here is where Hava, right in the middle of Rue De Ville, imitated an exotic princess seducing a lamp post. The lamp post wasn't interested but, according to Hava, the captain of the guard would have been.

I was embarrassed that someone might be watching, as Hava unfurled an invisible mask from her face and began to dance seductively around the lamp post, waving her imaginary veil over her head.

'Hava, stop dancing. The police will be called. My father is a general in the army. It won't look good for me.'

'Salomé slowly strips off one veil at a time,' Hava said with glee, 'and the king promises her that he will grant her any wish if she takes off the final veil.' Hava began a pretend striptease. 'She does so and then demands the head of the prophet.'

I giggled.

'The poor king is so frightened of the prophet's powers that he offers Salomé rings, gold, or wild animals instead, but Salomé is determined to seek revenge upon the man who turned her down. So, the king has no choice but to have the prophet beheaded.'

Hava stopped at the window of a chocolate shop. She turned to me and ran her finger dramatically across her throat. 'When the prophet's head is brought to Salomé on a tray, she feels such remorse

that she kisses the prophet's lips. The king is so repulsed – and jealous – that he orders the death of Salomé, too. End of the opera.'

'What part does John Charles Tillman play?'

'I don't know. The prophet I hope. Let's buy some chocolate.'

Chapter 5

Europe cannot find peace until the Jewish question has been solved. In the course of my life I have very often been a prophet and have usually been ridiculed for it. Today I will once more be a prophet: if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshivization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.

Adolf Hitler, 22 August 1939, Obersalzberg, speech to chief military commanders

Five days later I went to Hava's home for the first time.

When I reached her house on the Marché au Charbon, not far from the Grand Place, I noticed the door made from heavy black wood. I had never seen such a door, decorated with brass hinges and filigree scrolled on each corner. In the middle of the door was a knocker in the shape of a small brass fist, and below that was the single word engraved on an iron plaque: DANIELS.

To the right of the door was a small, rectangular decorative case marked with a single Hebrew letter: ד.

I was about to reach for the brass fist when the black door opened and there was Hava. Her long golden hair, usually neatly combed and braided, was dishevelled. She wore a plain white dress.

My hair was brown, short, and ruled by unmanageable curls that I pinned back.

'You've come after all,' Hava said as she reached out and grabbed my hand. 'I told Mama and Papa all about you.'

'Did you tell them that Clark Gable is my greatest admirer?' We had discussed the actor at our last meeting, after discovering that he had been cast as Rhett Butler in the forthcoming film version of *Gone with the Wind*.

'I decided that they would be much more impressed that you are the daughter of General Lyon. And Simone, I ought to warn you, my parents are from Poland and as serious about God as I am about the opera.'

'Why is it so dark?' I asked Hava as she closed the door behind me and we stepped into the front hall.

Hava whispered, 'Today is the Day of Mourning.' She explained to me that it was also a day of fasting, Tisha B'Av. 'On this day we remember the destruction of the First Temple in our country. King Solomon built it for his kingdom, but in 586 BC the Babylonians tore the temple down.'

I looked at Hava as the dim daylight from the front door seemed to enshroud her in a ghost-like mist.

'The Second Temple built by Ezra was destroyed by the Romans. That's when the people of Judea began the Jewish exile from the Holy Land. Our holy books tell us the Second Temple was destroyed on the Ninth of Av in the Hebrew calendar – or today, 25 July.'

I looked at Hava as the soft light outlined the bones in her cheek, and then I whispered, 'Who cares about old temples!' just as Hava's father stepped into the hall.

'Is this your Red Cross friend?'

Yaakov Yosef Daniels' face looked like a woodcarving: deep wrinkles above a beard of bark. He wore a tangled white and blue shawl draped over his shoulder, the shawl held tightly around his neck with one hand. In the other hand he held an old book.

Yaakov Yosef Daniels looked at me seriously, then said, 'The stones of the old temples are the punctuation marks of history. Have you come to mourn with us?'

Hava explained to her father that I had come to escort her to the opera, as I stood in the hall trying to reverse time and erase my dismissive words from the crumbling temples that began to surround me.

'Opera? For over twenty-five centuries we have celebrated Tisha B'Av, and now my daughter wants to go to the opera?'

Yaakov looked at my wild brown hair and my brightly embroidered dress.

'What is your name?' Yaakov asked.

'Papa, I told you, her name is Simone Lyon. Her father is General Joseph Lyon.'

I extended my hand, but Yaakov raised his book and shook his head. 'It is forbidden to greet each other on this day. Perhaps another day, daughter of the general. We do not eat or drink for a day, in remembrance of those who suffered before us. We do not wash or bathe, but surrender ourselves to the desecrated bodies of our ancestors. We do not use oil or cream on our skin, or wear leather shoes. We atone for the suffering. Follow me.' Yaakov waved his book.

'But, Papa,' Hava said. 'The opera?'

Yaakov stopped, turned, and looked at the two of us standing in the opal light.

'First, you will listen to the song of my world, and then you may go to the song of your world.' Then Yaakov added as he winked at me, 'Different temples; similar form of worship'.

Hava and I entered a room where I was introduced to Hava's mother, Avital, and her 10-year-old brother, Benjamin.

'Welcome, Simone,' Avital said.

As I sat between Madame Daniels and Benjamin, the boy looked at me and said, 'Hi! I can blow a bubble as big as my head.'

'Benjamin,' Yaakov said in a deep voice. The boy lowered his head. Hava giggled.

In the corner of the room was a Sabbath light; a brass, three-branched candelabra. On a side table against the wall a Passover dish waited with its eight indentations for chopped nuts, grated apples, cinnamon, and sweet red wine, parsley, roasted lamb, hard-boiled eggs, and bitter herbs. A wine cup stood next to it. 'This is for when we break our fast,' Hava explained.

Many pictures were displayed on the table: grandparents in their wedding gowns, uncles sitting in canoes, children standing in fountains, plump babies, women under beach umbrellas. And so many books filled the shelves: novels, poetry, history. I even saw a new copy of *Gone with the Wind*.

Hava sat stoically between her mother and father.

'We all suffer,' Yaakov said. 'We witness the sorrow of the flowers, Simone. Although they will blossom, exude aromas, and celebrate themselves with colours of yellow and red, they will perish just the same. But God does not allow the *idea* of the flowers to perish.

'Your father suffered greatly in the war with the Germans,' Yaakov continued. 'He lost the use of his arm, and yet today he is a great general because he remains a good man, and because he understands suffering.' He turned to his daughter.

'Hava, I say to you, go to your opera tonight with your friend, but remember, you are a girl of light. Simone, we live in darkness on this day of lamentation, to remember the light of our souls.'

Yaakov lifted the book he had been holding since he first stepped into the hallway. I noticed the blue veins in his hands, and then I listened as he read:

'Console, O Lord, the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem and the city laid waste, despised and desolate. In mourning for she is childless, her dwellings laid waste, despised in the downfall of her glory and desolate through the loss of her inhabitants. Legions have devoured her, worshippers of strange gods have possessed her. They have put the people of Israel to the sword. Therefore, let Zion weep bitterly and Jerusalem give forth her voice. For You, O Lord, did consume her with fire, and with fire You will in future restore her. Blessed are You, O Lord, Who consoles Zion and builds Jerusalem.'

'Hava,' Yaakov said to his daughter, 'remember what we say to God: *Blessed are You, O Lord, who consoles all men and women and builds every home, for we shall all be restored.*'

Hava looked at me from across the small table and winked.

'Now, go to your opera.'

Chapter 6

I have issued the command – and I'll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad – that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) *which we need.*

Adolf Hitler, August 22, 1939 stated to Reichmarshal Hermann Goering and the commanding generals at Obersalzberg

As Hava and I stepped into the street on our way to La Monnaie, the opera house, she said, 'My father thinks that I'm a sinner.'

'Maybe I can turn you into a saint,' I said as we walked along the warm summer street.

'Maybe I can crawl into one of Benjamin's bubbles and be invisible and enjoy as many sins as I can.'

I laughed. 'You can't hide from God. He's like my father – he keeps an eye on us no matter where we are.'

Hava ran ahead of me, stopped before a lamp post and saluted.

I laughed. 'Why did you salute the lamp post?'

'My father always says that I am a girl of light,' Hava answered. 'Maybe God is light. When it gets dark, the lamp post begins to glow, so I salute the god of the lamp post. Do you ever notice, Simone, the darker the night, the brighter the stars?

'It's true,' she continued. 'Stars shine brighter on the darkest nights. You probably noticed, Simone, that my family is very Jewish. They say a *lot* of prayers. Van Gogh said something like, *When I have a terrible need of religion, then I go out and paint the stars.* I don't have a terrible need of religion, but I do love stars.'

On that starry night, Hava and I attended the opera, wept for Salomé, and fell in love with John Charles Tillman.

Five short weeks later, Hitler invaded Poland.

Chapter 7

On 1 September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland with planes, tanks and soldiers, instigating a quick, fast assault intended to shock the country and smooth the way for his continued invasion, known as 'Blitzkrieg' (lightning war). The Second World War had begun.

I didn't know it at the time, but during the first war with Germany my father had belonged to an underground Resistance group called *La Dame Blanche* – the White Lady. Everyone in Europe had heard of the White Lady, a shadowy ghost who appeared and disappeared just out of the grasp of the enemy. How easy it seemed for the men and women of La Dame Blanche to trick the Germans as they occupied Belgium. The Resistance fighters monitored the enemy's train movements, blew up bridges in the night, cut telegraph lines, and rescued many soldiers who would otherwise have been taken prisoner. La Dame Blanche was the most successful Resistance movement in Belgium

When the Second World War began, my father still had connections with his former Resistance colleagues from the first war: priests, nuns, former officers … So, when Hitler invaded

Poland, my father knew even before the people at the newspapers or radio were informed.

'Blitzkrieg,' my father said as he sat at the breakfast table, having just ridden Charlotte in the palace gardens. 'I have just received a communication that Hitler has amassed his tanks and planes and invaded Poland.'

I remember my father sitting at the head of the table, his hair neatly trimmed, his tunic unbuttoned. My father never wore his uniform improperly except at breakfast, when his buttons were not clipped together and his brown braces hung loose.

'What does *Blitzkrieg* mean?' I asked.

'Lightning war,' my father explained. 'We have known for many years that Hitler has been building tanks and planes. Germany lost great portions of land during the First World War. Some say he wants it back. He's a madman. Blitzkrieg means attacking with speed, surprise, troops, and light tanks.'

I looked at my father across the table. He was suddenly silent as he stirred his coffee. My father spoke about Prussia, the Treaty of Versailles, and how Hitler hated Poland. Then he placed his fork down and said, 'Not again. We've already had one war. Not again.'

I asked my father where the German army was in Poland. He said that Hitler had invaded from the west, the north, and the south. 'They have planes and fast tanks. Major Roul has relatives in Wlodawa. He says that all communication has ceased from there.'

He stood up from the table, buttoned up his tunic, and said, 'But don't worry, my beautiful Simone. Hitler is far away. Now, I'm off to work.' I saluted, and he leaned over and kissed me on the head. Then I watched him walk down the hall, open the front door, turn, smile, and step out, closing the door gently behind him.

I did not see my father again for four years.

I cleared the table, walked up to my bedroom, and shut the door. We lived in a beautiful, three-storey townhouse. On the second floor we had four bedrooms. One was used as my father's office, another as a library. My father's bedroom faced the front of the house, and my room faced the small courtyard behind the house. Each morning I woke up and measured my day based on the sky and the branches of the apple tree.

If, when I first opened my eyes, the sky was blue and the apple leaves still, I knew that the day would be filled with quiet adventure – reading, or writing a letter to my aunt, a chemist who had never married. She collected my letters in a green trunk she kept in her parlour.

If, when I woke, the sky was blue and the leaves were being pushed back and forth by the invisible wind, I imagined that my day would be filled with agitation: my father expecting me to clean my room, Hava jealous that my father had the use of a horse, my own mood deciding I would be unhappy for the rest of my life because I would be a spinster just like my aunt, and would keep letters from a silly, plain 18-year-old niece.

Wlodawa. Wlodawa. I wanted to know, suddenly, how far from my room Wlodawa, in Poland, was. I was afraid of a war entering my life. My father had warned me about its monstrous effects.

I rummaged inside a cupboard where I kept my drawing supplies, my old dolls, books, and used diaries, and retrieved a coloured map of Europe.

I opened the map like a picnic blanket on the floor before my tall mirror. France was yellow. Belgium was green. Germany was brown. Poland was pink. I placed my index finger on Wlodawa,

Poland, and my thumb on Brussels. Then I compared the space between my fingers to the numbered scale at the top of the map: 1,100 kilometres.

I looked at the girl in the mirror and said aloud, '1,100 kilometres might just as well be as far away as the moon.' The girl in the mirror smiled back. 'No army can hurt you, Simone, if it's 1,100 kilometres away.'

Chapter 8

Our strength consists in our speed and in our brutality. Genghis Khan led millions of women and children to slaughter – with premeditation and a happy heart. History sees in him solely the founder of a state. It's a matter of indifference to me what a weak Western European civilization will say about me.

From Adolf Hitler's Obersalzberg Speech he gave to his commanders at his Obersalzberg home on 22 August 1939r

I felt safe and strong. The new war was being fought thousands of miles away. I knew my father would protect me. He had spoken proudly about the Albert Canan fortifications, the modern bunkers and British Hurricane fighter planes that Belgium maintained. The famous fort at Eben-Emael alone had 1,200 troops to protect me, the country, and the Belgian army.

That autumn day in school, Sister Bernadette called me to her desk to tell me that my father had been called away by the Foreign Ministry. 'Your aunt will be staying with you while he's gone. She'll be waiting for you at home.'

At the time, I was not told where my father had gone, but I

learned many years later that he was meeting with other military officials from England, Holland, and France to discuss the war. Sister Bernadette assured me that Belgium had made a pact with Germany and that Belgium would remain neutral territory. Although I would miss my father, I wasn't worried, since I knew that the war was far away.

Sister Bernadette was my literature teacher. We had just finished a discussion in class on lines from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*:

> And since you know you cannot see yourself,
> so well as by reflection, I, your glass,
> will modestly discover to yourself,
> that of yourself which you yet know not of.

I was convinced that he had written those lines for Hava and me. I never could see myself, without seeing Hava as my mirror. Whenever she stood before me and sang a song, or teased me, or told a joke, I saw glimpses of myself and I liked how I felt beside Hava: complete.

Aunt Margaret was indeed waiting for me when I returned home from school that afternoon, and that evening, when I could not bear the ticking of the great clock in the hall any longer, and I could not read any more from *Gone with the Wind*, I walked out of my room and found her downstairs in the kitchen making a cup of tea.

'Your father will be away for a while,' she said, as she looked at me. She ran her fingers through my messy hair and added, 'Perhaps it would have been better if you had read more fairy tales when you were a child. There are far more ogres and trolls in this world than you might believe.'

I tried to convince my aunt that, as an 18-year-old girl, I knew plenty about ogres and trolls, as well as more serious matters, but she just shook her head and said that there might be a war, that perhaps we would be in danger. I tried to explain to her that she was just frightened because of the war of 1916.

'No one is unlucky enough to have two wars in their country,' I said confidently.

My aunt looked pale as she reached out and handed me my father's Croix de Guerre. 'He asked me to give this to you.' My father's medal was like his second heart. 'He wants you to have it in case anything happens to him. He said it will protect you against monsters.'

I took the medal, caressed it gently, and kissed it. Then I carried it to my room, placed it under my pillow, and like Scarlet O'Hara, the unstoppable heroine of *Gone with the Wind*, Isaid aloud, 'I won't think of it now. I can't stand it now. I'll think of it later.'

Although it concerned me that my father was not at home, I held onto the false security that he was somewhere in the Foreign Ministry, tucked away in some important office. I did not know at the time that he was working for the Resistance, that months later he would be on the Nazis' execution list when he would escape across the Pyrenees and into Spain.

The next time Corporal De Waden came to my house he handed me a letter. 'It's from your father.' I opened the envelope and saw my father's neat handwriting.

Dear Simone:

Remember when I told you about Albert Forster and Poland? The monster is growing in strength. Hitler is doing the same. He

said this in a recent speech: 'Essentially all depends on me, on my existence, because of my political talents. There will probably never again in the future be a man with more authority than I have. My existence is therefore a factor of great value.'

Simone, nothing depends on one person. This one man has no value. When we all live together as one, goodness survives. I'll be away from home for some time, and my letters might not always be able to reach you. But don't worry about me. I'll be fine.

As for you Simone, don't leave the house if Hitler and his army come. Do not go into the streets. Stay inside and lock the door. It's important for you to remember to stay inside if they come.

Hold onto my Croix de Guerre. You will pin it onto my lapel when we are together again. Listen to your aunt, and rest your eyes between readings. I love you. All will be well.

Papa

I'll think of this later, I thought to myself as I folded the letter and tucked it into my pocket.

Chapter 9

On 23 November 1939, a law was passed stating that all Jews over the age of 10 living in Nazi-occupied Poland must wear the Star of David stitched onto their clothes. In the same month, the Soviet Union invaded Finland. The war was slowly approaching Belgium.

As autumn began to fade into winter, I fell into an ordinary routine. My Aunt Margaret stayed with me, mending socks, offering advice on how to comb my hair, and insisting that I read *Etiquette and Manners* by Emily Post every night for an hour.

Corporal De Waden arrived faithfully every Sunday morning with Charlotte. Only now, I rode the horse instead of my father. After one of our rides in the Royal Park, as I was adjusting my scarf before walking back into the house, he tried to kiss me. I had never been kissed by a man before. I thought he was leaning in to help me with my scarf. I leaned away from the corporal, smiled, and went inside the house.

Hava arranged a birthday party for me at her home. She gave me a poster of Clark Gable, and a copy of *Rebecca*, the latest book by Daphne du Maurier. She said, as I looked at the cover 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' When I asked her what

that meant, she said I had to read the book. 'It's like "Tara", the house in *Gone with the Wind*.'

I had visited Hava's home several times before the war started. That day, Benjamin invited me to his room and said that he was going to paint me a picture for my birthday. I peered over his shoulder as he worked with a little brush and ink and I asked him what he was drawing. 'I'm making you a picture of God.'

'But no one knows what God looks like,' I laughed.

'They will in a minute,' the boy said as he dipped his brush in the inkwell.

When Benjamin had finished with his drawing, he walked up to me with a drawing and chortled, 'See? This is what God looks like.'

'How do you know God wore green shirts?' I asked.

'Well, it must be his favourite colour, don't you think?' he replied. 'Almost everything outside is green.'

'Are those two crosses above his head?' I pointed to the painting.

He rolled his eyes skyward. 'No, those are orange kites, Simone. God has to have fun sometimes.'

Hava and her parents were reading silently in the outer room, when Benjamin and I entered.

'Look what Benjamin drew for me,' I said. 'It's God.'

Yaakov looked at his son and said, 'Benjamin, your God is smiling. Good.'

Benjamin crawled onto his father's lap and said, 'Papa, tell us a story. Tell Simone one of your stories.'

I felt as if I was intruding on the peace of the house. 'Monsieur Daniels, perhaps I should be going home.'

'Sit there, daughter of the general.' He gestured towards a wooden chair next to Hava.

'Tell her the one about the ant. Simone will love the one about the ant.'

Yaakov rubbed his beard against his son's cheek and began, 'There was an ant that lived under the baker's house.'

'The baker lived with his son and wife,' Benjamin said as he sat up on his father's lap.

'Do you want to tell the story, Benjamin?' Yaakov asked as he winked at me.

'No. You tell it, Papa.'

'The baker lived with his son and his wife. Everyone belieed the baker to be a man of honour and humour. His only fault was his harsh manner toward his son.'

Benjamin squirmed a bit.

'Whenever a customer entered the shop, the baker wiped his hands, stood behind the counter, and waited for an order.'

'The bigger the order, the better the service,' Benjamin called out.

'Let your father tell the story,' Avital scolded, smiling.

Yaakov continued, 'Yes, Benjamin, the bigger the order the better the service. When asked for ten loaves, the baker would grasp the customer's hand eagerly and shake it vigorously, while shouting at the same time to his son, "Check the oven, fool, and find the most freshly baked loaves for our kind customer!"

'Customers with small orders received older bread, and the son received harsher treatment.'

'Tell about the ant, Papa,' Benjamin said.

'One afternoon an ant entered the bakery. When the baker stepped up to the counter, he wiped his hands, looked around, and saw no one, although he was certain that he had heard the door swing open. "Imbecile!" the baker called out to his son. "Why have you left the door open?"

"I haven't been near the door, Father," the boy answered meekly.

'The father looked around, but did not notice the ant on the floor. "Get back to work!" the father ordered.

'The ant edged around the corner of the counter and whispered to the boy, "Psssst. Do you have some crumbs for sale?" asked the ant.

'The boy looked up at his father, who was busy combing his hair, then he turned to the ant and said, "I don't believe we have a crumb so big that we would have to charge you."

"Oh, no," said the ant. "A labour made is traded for a payment collected. I will give you a bag of gold for your bread.'"

'I like that part,' Benjamin said.

Yaakov smiled and continued. '"But," said the boy, "no crumb is worth that much. Here. Take what you need," and the boy pushed some crumbs from the counter onto his open palm and reached down to the ant.

'The ant said to the boy' – and here is where Benjamin recited the words along with his father – "Because of your kindness, I will triple my pay for your bread: three bags of gold."

"But," said the boy, "that's a king's fortune for such a small favour. Please. Let me give you a whole loaf of our finest bread. That will last you all winter."

'The ant was about to offer the boy a hundred bags of gold when the father stepped on the ant, twisted his shoe against the floor, and struck the boy on the back of his head. "Fool! Wasting your time fiddling with useless ants. Return to your work!"

'Within a year the colony of hungry ants ate the foundations of the bakery. The building was condemned, the bakery was torn down, the baker died of gout, and the son became a carpenter and prospered.'

Benjamin jumped off his father's lap and ran to me. 'Simone, did you like the story?'

'Yes, I liked it very much.'

Benjamin hopped on my lap and whispered, 'Someday I am going to be a carpenter.'

That night, when I returned home, I taped Benjamin's picture of God above my bed.

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