



Resistance

Anita
Shreve

'An enigmatic tale of
impossible love'

DAILY TELEGRAPH

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended the author.

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RESISTANCE

“From the first sentence, Anita Shreve draws in the reader with the quiet poetry of her narrative voice.... *Resistance* is a turn-off-the-phone, put-the-kids-in-bed-early, stay-up-till-two-in-the-morning-on-a-work-night reading experience.”

—Mary Gill
Detroit Free Press

“In beautiful, unpretentious language, Shreve embarks on a complex journey exploring the human spirit.... In *Resistance*, passion is heightened, courage is found, commitment is tested. Suspense, story, and character are mastered. The result—from its grasp of the darkness of war to its acute understanding of love and an unexpected eroticism—will send shivers up and down readers’ spines.”

—Nancy McAllister
Columbus Dispatch

“Shreve is an intelligent, powerful writer.”

—Rebecca Radne
San Francisco Chronicle

“Reminiscent of Helen MacInnes's *Assignment in Brittany* and Erich Maria Remarque's *Arch of Triumph*.... Here's to Ms. Shreve.”

—Rollene Saeed
New York Times Book Review

“With deceptive simplicity and superb control, Shreve evokes the impersonal horrors of wartime and its heartbreaking personal tragedies.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Lucid writing and a suspenseful plot make *Resistance* a thrilling read.”

—*Chattanooga Free Press*

“A beautiful novel.... Anita Shreve writes with a practiced perfection that gives brilliance to a stirring adventure tale.”

—Barbara Hodge Hall
Anniston Star

“Anita Shreve's perceptive novel relates a simple story set in terrible times in a clear dispassionate voice.... Her respect for her characters is striking, as is the meticulous attention to detail.... I reached the last chapter with hungry eyes, wanting more.”

—Danielle Rote

“Shreve's prose is as gentle and dignified as the affair she describes.”

—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“With her signature spare prose and skill at spinning a taut tale, Shreve's characters spring to life as she evokes the fear, pain, and longing of their desperate situation.... *Resistance* has all the authentic passion and intensity nestled in beautifully written prose. This is the real thing.”

Dianne Bock Stern

White Plains Reporter-Dispatch

A Wedding in December

Light on Snow

All He Ever Wanted

Sea Glass

The Last Time They Met

Fortune's Rock

The Pilot's Wife The Weight of Water

Where or When

Strange Fits of Passion

Eden Close

For our fathers who flew in the war

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS NOVEL IS ENTIRELY A WORK OF FICTION, YET IT would not have been possible without the help of the following individuals: Marlyse Martin Haward, Andre Lepin, and Rosa Guyaux, who shared with me details and anecdotes about Belgium during World War II; John Rising, Chief Pilot of the Collings Foundation, who checked over the flying sequences for me; George Cole, who took me up in his plane and, in particular, Mable Osborn, who gave the seeds of a story. I would also like to thank my editor, Michael Pietsch, and my agent, Virginia Barber.

Finally, a necessary word about the Belgian surnames. I have used, for the most part, surnames that were or are prevalent in southern Belgium. Just as the novel is fictional, however, so are the names that are attached to the various characters. I mention this because the period about which I have written is a sensitive one, and my use of certain names is not meant in any way to confer honor upon, or castigate, any Belgian families.

10 November 1993

Gentlemen,

INAUGURATION OF A MONUMENT
TO YOUR FLYING FORTERESSE B 17

On Thursday next December 30, our association will inaugurate a monument in remembrance to your aeroplane fallen down on 1943 december 30th at the Heights nearly our village. It consists in a marble block extracted out of our village quarry on which a stele with the following inscription will be fixed.

Homage à nos alliés

Le 30 décembre 1943 vers midi s'écroula à 500 m d'ioi la forteresse volante américaine
Woman's Home Companion

Equipage

Pilots: Lt. T. Brice
Co-pilote: Lt. W. Case
Navigateur: Lt. E. Baker
Bombardier: Lt. N. Shulman
Ingénieur: J. McNulty
Ass. Ingénieur: E. Rees
Radio: G. Callahan
Ass. Radio: V. Tripp
Mitrailleur: L. Ekberg
Mitrailleur: P. Warren

Delahaut, le 30 XII 1993

With this letter, we would like to invite you and your wife to be present at the inauguration. It will be a pleasure for us to offer you a lodge in Delshaut.

If you are still in contact with the other members of the crew, please will you make them known they are also welcome. Send us their address so we can invite them officially.

Meanwhile, Gentlemen, please agree our best remembrance. *Jean Benoît*

DECEMBER 30, 1943

THE PILOT PAUSED AT THE EDGE OF THE WOOD, WHERE already it was dark, oak-dark at midday. He propped himself against a tree, believing that in the shadows he was hidden, at least for the moment. The others had fled. He was the last out of the pasture, watching until they had all disappeared, one by one, indistinct brown shapes quickly enveloped by the forest.

All, that is, except for the two on the ground, one dead, one dying. He could no longer hear the gunner's panicky questions. The cold and the wound had silenced him, or perhaps the morphine, administered by Ted's frozen fingers, had dulled the worst of it. Dragging his own wounded leg through the battered bomber, Ted had reached the gunner, drawn to him by the pitch of the man's voice. He had separated the gunner from the metal that seemed to clutch at him and pulled the man onto the hard ground, still white with frost even at noon. The wound was to the lower abdomen, too low, Ted could see that at once. The gunner had screamed then, asked him, demanded, but Ted looked away, businesslike with the needle, and whispered something that was meant to be reassuring but was taken by the wind. The gunner felt frantically with oily fingers for the missing pieces. The pilot and the navigator had held his arms, pinned him.

Possibly the gunner was dead already, he thought at the edge of the forest. There was too much blood around the body, a hot spring that quickly pooled, froze, on the ground. The other man, the rear gunner, the man who was undeniably dead, dragged also to lie beside the wounded, had not a scratch on him.

Ted slowly tilted his head back, took the air deep into his body. As a boy he had shot squirrels in the wood at home, and there were sometimes days like this, days without color, when the sky was oil and gray and his fingers froze on the 22.

The plane lay silent on the frosty field, a charred scar behind it, the forest not forty feet from its nose. A living thing shot down, crippled now forever. A screaming, vibrating giant come obscenely to rest in a pasture.

He ought to have set fire to the plane. Those were his instructions. But he could not set a fire that might consume a living man, and so they had gathered all the provisions in the plane and made a kind of catafalque near the gunner, whom they had wrapped in parachute silk, winding sheets, the white silk stained immediately with red.

Soon people would come to the pasture. The fall of the big plane from the sky could not have been missed. Ted didn't know if the ground he sat on was German or French or Belgian. It could be German, might well be German.

He had to move deeper into the wood. He hesitated, did not want to leave the plane. He felt, leaving it, that he was abandoning a living thing, an injured dog, to be dismembered by strangers. They would take the guns first, then the engines, then every serviceable piece of metal, leaving a carcass, a dog's bones.

Gunmetal bones. A plane picked clean by buzzards.

One's duty was to the living.

Ted might have aborted. He was allowed to abort. He knew the mission was not a milk run, that they were going into German territory, to Ludwigshafen, to the chemical plant. And he had felt

unlucky without Mason, his navigator, whom he had found drunk in a hotel room in Cambridge with his English girlfriend. When Ted had entered, the room had been heavy with the smell of gin. A bottle was nearly empty on a side table. Mason had looked at Ted and had laughed at him. Ted had thought then, abort. A missing navigator was a bad omen. They had flown eleven missions together, had sometimes come under heavy fire, but there had been no serious injuries, no deaths. Abort, he tried to tell himself; but at dawn, when the thin, wintry light had come up over the landing field, and he'd looked at his plane, he could not make the decision to abort. Mason was replaced. A capable man but stranger. Together they had pinned the arms of the gunner, looked into each other's eyes.

But had the missing piece of the crew fatally altered the mix, in the same way that an error in the mix of the fuel, too rich or too thin, could also be fatal? Had unease over the missing navigator made Ted hesitate even a second when he should not have hesitated, or made him act too quickly when he *should* have hesitated? Had his belief in bad omens clouded in some indefinable way his judgment? Case, his copilot, was right. They should have ditched. But he couldn't, and it was no use pretending he could.

Twigs crackled. Ted tried to stand, leaned against the rough bark. He had dragged himself out of the clearing, his right leg wounded inside his flight suit. When he stood, the pain traveled up his thigh. He embraced the tree, his forehead against the bark. A sudden sweat broke out on his face from the pain. He bent over quickly, heaved onto the frozen leaves. He might have saved a needle for himself, but he was afraid that he would crawl into the forest and freeze to death while he slept. He knew he had to move deeper into the wood.

Today was his birthday. He was twenty-two.

Where did the gunner's dick go? he wondered.

He turned to look at the plane once again, and from his full height he saw what he had not seen before: In dragging himself to the edge of the forest, he had made a path in the frost, a path as clear and distinct as a walkway shoveled in snow. He heard the first of the muffled shouts then. A foreign voice. He dropped to the ground and pulled himself away from the pasture.

The boy reached the Heights before Marcel. Jean dropped his bicycle, his chest burning. He gulped in the icy air and stared at the plane on the dead grass. He had never seen such a big plane, never. It was somehow terrifying, that enormous plane, unnatural here. How did a machine, all that metal, ever get up into the sky? He approached the plane cautiously, wondering if it might still explode. He heard Marcel behind him, breathing hard like a dog.

Jean walked toward the bomber and saw the bodies, the two men in leather helmets, one man wrapped in a parachute. The white silk was bloody, drenched in blood.

Jean spun and yelled at Marcel: "La Croix-Rouge, Marcel! Madame Dinant! La Croix-Rouge!"

Marcel hesitated just a moment, then did as Jean had asked, unwilling yet to see exactly what his friend had seen.

When Marcel had gone, Jean walked slowly toward the plane. For the first time since he'd seen the giant, smoking surprise drop suddenly from the cloud cover, he could breathe evenly. He was chilled, the sweat beginning to freeze inside his pullover. He hadn't thought to fetch his coat before racing out of the school to head for the Heights.

When he reached the plane, he looked down at the bodies. Both of the flyers had their eyes closed, but the man wrapped in blood was still breathing. Beside the two men was a pile of canteens and brown canvas sacks.

Jean moved away from the men and began to circle the plane.

The plane was American, he was sure of that.

The bomber rested deeply on its belly, as if partially embedded in the ground, the propellers jammed and bent under the wings. The wings were extraordinarily long. The tail seemed to have been ripped apart, to have stripped itself in the air, and there were dozens of holes in the fuselage, some of them as large as windows. There were markings on the plane and a white, five-pointed star.

Jean walked to the front of the plane. Perhaps, he thought, there were men still trapped inside the cockpit, and for a moment he entertained the fantasy of rescuing them, saving their lives. The windshield had been shot away. Jean climbed onto the wing and peered into the cockpit. He looked at the debris and glass and smashed instrument casings. He tried to imagine himself behind the controls. He hopped off the wing then, and walked around the nose to the other side of the plane. Below the cockpit was a drawing he couldn't quite believe and beneath the drawing were English words he couldn't read. If Marcel had been with him, Jean would have pointed to the drawing, and the two boys would have laughed. But alone, Jean did not feel like laughing.

Slowly he circled the rest of the plane and returned to the two men lying on the ground. The man in the parachute began to moan, opened his eyes. Instinctively, Jean backed away. He didn't know whether he should speak or remain silent. For a moment, his own eyes welled with tears, and he wished Madame Dinant would hurry up and get here. What could a ten-year-old boy do for the man in the pasture?

He walked backwards from the plane, his hands frozen in his pockets. And as he did so, he saw what ought to have been obvious to him, but was lost in his eagerness to inspect the plane. Fanning out from the front of the plane to the forest were footprints in the frost—large footprints, not his own. He could see distinctly where the footprints had gone: this trail, and that trail, and that trail—all into the wood, spokes from the plane.

And then there was the one path.

In the distance, Jean heard voices, the murmur of excited, breathless voices scurrying up the hill toward the pasture. Quickly Jean marked in his memory the entry points of the various trails into the forest. Without knowing quite why he was doing this, he began to scuffle over the field, erasing footprints with his shoes. The voices grew louder. His own feet would not be sufficient. He ran to the edge of the clearing, ripped down a fir branch. He whirled around the pasture, sweeping the frost from the grass.

Antoine was ahead of him, limping with remarkable speed up the cow path. How could such a fat, ungainly man move so fast? Henri wondered. His own chest stung with the effort. He didn't want to find this plane, didn't want to see it.

Just minutes ago, in the village, he and Antoine had been drinking at Jauquet's. Thinking to make something of a noon break, not quite a meeting, talking about the leaflets, drinking Jauquet's beer, not as good as his own. And then the plane dropping out of the sky as they sat there in the Burghermaster's small, frozen garden. Dipping and wobbling as they watched, three of its engines trailing dark plume creating an eerie charcoal drawing. He wanted to cover his head; he thought the plane would fall onto the village. The bomber barely missed the steeple of St. Catherine's, and Henri could see it had no landing gear. Excitement and fear rose in him as he watched the plane lift slightly and then fall, and then lift again to disappear over the Heights. Waiting for the explosion then, watching for billows of smoke from the field. In silence they had waited seconds. Nothing had happened.

American, Antoine had said.

How long since the plane had crashed? Nine minutes? Eleven?

The others approached the clearing just ahead of him. Thérèse Dinant was first, walking so fast she was bent forward in her wool coat, retying her kerchief under her chin against the cold. Behind her, Jauquet was puffing hard to beat her into the pasture. Léon, a thin man with steel glasses and a worker's cap, couldn't take the hill, was falling back. And schoolboys, running, as if this were an outing.

He heard exclamations of surprise, some fear. He turned the corner and took it all in at once: the broken plane, the bodies, the scarred ground. From habit, he crossed himself.

Not a crash, but a belly landing. The smell of petrol, the thought of fire. Thérèse kneeling in the frost. Taking the pulse of a man wrapped in a parachute, speaking constantly to him in a low voice. She raised the wrist of another man beside the first, but Henri could see, even from where he stood, that the man was dead. It was the color of his face.

Dinant looked up and ordered stretchers and a truck. Girard, who worked with Bastien, the undertaker, ran suddenly from the pasture.

More people arrived in the clearing. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty. The villagers surrounded the plane, climbed onto the wings. Schoolboys rubbed the metal of the engine cowling with knitted gloves as if it were burnished gold. They peered down under the wings to marvel at how the propellers had bent in the landing. A distance was kept from the wounded and the dead, with Thérèse watching over them, except that some of the men gave their coats to be piled over the wounded man to warm him.

Henri meant to give his coat. He couldn't move.

Women—farmers' wives, shopkeepers—inspected canvas sacks, exclaiming over the provisions. The chocolate, he saw, was taken immediately. Later, he thought, after the bodies had been removed, the sacks would be picked clean.

There was activity inside the plane. Paper and instruments were spilling from the cockpit. He saw Antoine beckoning for him to come closer. Henri stood with uplifted hands to receive the salvaged goods. He didn't want to see what the instruments were, what the papers said. It was always true: The less you knew the better.

How long until the Germans came to the clearing? Minutes? An hour? If they came around the corner now, he would be shot.

Turning, he saw Jauquet with schoolbags he'd commandeered from the children. How did the Burghermaster know which children could be trusted? Antoine climbed out of the plane and over the wing. He slid to the ground, helped to pack the sacks.

I'll wait two hours, then go to St. Laurent. Jauquet speaking, puffed up with the mission. To tell the Germans was what he meant. Standard procedure in the Resistance, Jauquet said knowingly, though privately Henri wondered how the man could be so sure, since this was the first plane ever to fall precisely in the village. Jauquet expansive now, explaining the risk: If the Germans found the plane before they were officially told, Jauquet's head would be in a noose. But more than likely, Henri thought, the Germans were eating and drinking at L'Hôtel de Ville in St. Laurent, as they did at every noon hour, and had probably had so much beer to drink already they hadn't seen or heard the plane. It was meant to be a joke: The Belgian beer was the country's best defensive weapon.

He saw a boy by the front of the plane now, gesturing to another, looking up at something on the nose. The boys' eyes widened. They whispered excitedly and pointed. "La chute obscène," Henri heard them say.

Stretchers were arriving on a truck. Thérèse would take the flyers home, tend to the wounded.

Bastien would come for the dead man. If the wounded man lived, he'd be put into the network before the Germans could find him.

The village women maneuvered in toward the sacks. More people at the pasture, gathering closer to the plane, as if it were alive, a curiosity at the circus. Fifty now, maybe sixty. Schoolgirls in thick woolen socks and brown shoes stood on the wing and crawled forward to peer into the cockpit. There was nervous giggling. Their laughter seemed disrespectful to Henri, and he was irritated by the girls.

Beside him, Antoine's voice: We'll hide the sacks with Claire, convene a meeting in the church.

Henri turned with a protest, the words dying on his tongue. Not with Claire, he wanted to say. Antoine's face a wall.

We've got to find the pilots, Antoine insisted quietly. Before the Germans do.

Henri, with the heavy sacks, nodded as he knew he must. It was beginning now, he thought, and who could say where it would end?

When she was alone, she sometimes stood at the window near the pump and looked across the flat fields toward France. The fields, gray since November, were indistinguishable from the color of the farm buildings, stone structures with thick walls and slate roofs. On cold days like this, she could not always tell where in the distance the fields met the sky. She liked to imagine that in France, if she could go there, there would be color—that it would be like turning the pages of a book and coming unexpectedly upon a color plate. That was the image she had in her mind of crossing the border, a drawing of color.

She drew from the pocket of her skirt a cigarette and lit it. She stood at the window, looking out, one arm across her chest, the other holding the cigarette. The smoke wafted in a lazy design around her hair in front of the glass. This was her third already, and she knew she must slow down. Henry was good about the cigarettes. He seldom failed to come by them, no matter how scarce they were in the village. And the bargain she had made with him, one bargain of many, was that she would smoke no more than the five on any given day.

They had brought her an old Jewish woman this time. The woman had escaped the Gestapo by hiding in her chimney for two days and nights. The woman's son, who was a doctor in Antwerp, had designed the hiding place for his mother in her home because her shoulders and hips were so narrow, even at seventy-five, that she could fit inside the chimney. When the Gestapo came before dawn, the old woman ran directly to the chimney and climbed to the foot braces her son had made for her. She stood in the chimney in her nightgown, her feet spread apart on the braces. She regretted that she had not embraced her husband in the bed before each of them had jumped up and fled. She listened with fear as the policemen searched her home—once, twice, three times—and finally found her husband, who had also been a doctor, in his hiding place in the basement. It was all she could do to keep from crying out to him, so that now, in her sleep, the old woman often cried out to her lost husband: *Avram ... Avram ...* And Claire, through the wall, lay awake at night listening to her.

When the old woman's legs could stand no more, she slid from the braces and tumbled onto the damp hearth. She was found in the dirty fireplace, blackened beyond recognition, by the tailor's son, who had come to see if anyone in the doctor's house had survived the raids. The tailor's son at first thought the old woman had been burned alive by the Gestapo, and he vomited onto the Persian rug. But then she called out her husband's name—*Avram ... Avram ...*—and the tailor's son carried her to his mother's house. The tailor's wife bathed the old woman and put her into the network. It was unclear to Claire how long she had been traveling. The woman's story was told to Claire by the man who had

brought her to the house. The old woman herself had very little to say.

Madame Rosenthal was upstairs now, in the small attic room that was hidden behind the false back of the heavy oak armoire. The armoire had once been part of Claire's dowry. Henri had fashioned a door in its back that opened onto a small crawl space behind; and he had made a window in the slat roof, so that some light was let into the hiding place. If one day the Germans decided to climb onto the roof, the small opening, sealed with glass, would be discovered, and Claire and Henri, too, would be taken away and shot. But the window was hidden behind a chimney stack and not visible from the ground.

Madame Rosenthal was the twenty-eighth refugee to stay with them. Claire remembered each one like beads on a rosary. Barely had she and Henri heard of the fighting in Antwerp before they learned that Belgium's small army had been no match for the Nazis. Even so, she had been unable to believe the reality of the German occupation until the first of the refugees from the north had arrived at their village in May 1940. They stopped in the square and asked for food and beds. It seemed to her now that important lines were drawn, even in those first few weeks. Some of the residents of Delahaut had immediately come into the square and taken the displaced Belgians into their homes. Others had silently closed their doors and shutters. When, in that first month, Antoine had come into the kitchen of their house to ask Claire and Henri to join him in the Maquis, Claire had seen at once that Henri, on his own, might have closed his shutters. But Antoine was persistent. Claire had languages and the nursing, Antoine had pointed out. Henri had looked at Claire then, as if the languages and the nursing might one day be a danger to them both.

Their first family was from Brussels, the father a professor at the university. There were six of them in all, and Claire made up pallets in the second bedroom. That night, in the kitchen, she asked Henri if they should flee themselves, but Henri said no, he wouldn't leave the farm that had been his father's and his father's father's.

Then we have to make a hiding place, she said. There's going to be a flood.

Claire turned away from the window and laid out the white sausage made with milk and bread, the sausage that had no meat that she had made for her husband's noon meal. There was also a runny white cheese and a soup made from cabbages and onions. She had grown thin from the war, but her husband inexplicably, had grown bigger. It was the beer, she thought, the thick, dark beer Henri and the others made and kept hidden from the Germans. There were barrels of it in the barn, bottles of it in the cellar that sometimes popped or exploded. The beer was strong, heavy with alcohol, and if she drank even one glass, she felt peaceful almost immediately.

Earlier she had crawled awkwardly with her tray into the attic space and given the old woman some of the soup, holding her narrow shoulders with one arm, feeding her with a spoon. The old woman was extraordinarily frail now, and Claire did not see how she could be moved, how she could withstand a move. But the Maquis would want her out, across the border to France within the week. The network had arranged it, and there would be others who would need the attic room. More than likely, Claire thought, the doctor's wife would die in the attic.

She put her apron on again and prepared the coffee—a bitter coffee of chicory that no amount of sugar, if they had had sugar, could sweeten. At least, she thought, it was better than the coffee they'd had last month—a nearly undrinkable coffee made of malt. She moved back to the window and watched for her husband. She didn't know where he was or even if he would be back. He had left the barn more than an hour ago. He hadn't stopped to tell her why.

In the morning, he'd gone to the barn as he always did for the milking. They had had seventy cows before the war began; now they only had the twelve. The Germans had taken the rest. Henri spent most of his days tending the tiny herd and repairing simple farm machinery—a difficult task since parts were nonexistent. He had to fashion his own parts, design them, hammer them, from old pots or kettles or buckles, anything that Claire could spare from the house. Once he had taken her ladle, a pewter ladle with a long handle that she had brought with her to the marriage, and they had fought over the ladle until her anger had subsided. He had needed the ladle more than she had; it was simple

She didn't like to think of what it must be like each day for Henri in the barn. Perhaps he had been drinking from the barrels already, and she wouldn't blame him. The air was frozen arid raw, and sometimes it was colder in the barn than it was in the fields.

Behind the barn, they had the one truck, which they never used. There was no gasoline for the Belgians, but Henri had kept the gazogene, for emergencies. Surprisingly, the Germans had not taken the truck for themselves, although the soldiers sometimes commandeered it for a week at a time. Delahaut had escaped the fate of some towns. The Germans didn't billet there. The accommodations at St. Laurent were better.

Claire removed the brick from behind the stove and retrieved her book. That December she was reading English. Sometimes she read Dutch or Italian or French, but she preferred reading in English when she could get the books. She liked the English words, and liked to say them aloud when no one was in the house: *foxglove, cellar, whisper, needle*. She could read and speak English better than she could write it, and she was trying to teach herself this skill, though she had to be careful about leaving any traces of written English or the English books themselves in the house. She wished she could read in English to the old woman upstairs, but the woman's first language was Yiddish, to which she had retreated from the Flemish. Together they could communicate only in German, which seemed to distress them both.

She sat down at the oak table and held her book open with her crossed arms. The book had been given to her by an English gunner who had had to parachute out of his plane and who had broken his collarbone when he landed near Charleroi. She remembered the gunner, a thin, spotty-faced boy who had been at school when he'd been called up. He was ill suited to be a gunner—you could see that at once—a reed-thin boy with a delicate mouth. In his flight suit he had two books, a prayer book and a volume of English poetry, and when he left, he gave the book of poetry to Claire. He said he'd already read it too many times, but she suspected that was not quite true. She wondered where the boy was now. She was seldom told the fate of the people who passed through her house, often never knew if they made it to France or to England or if they died en route—shot or betrayed. She knew the beginnings of many stories, but not their endings.

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil...*

She liked the few poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins the best, even though she could not understand them very well. She took pleasure from the sound of the words, the way the poet had put the sounds together. Often she didn't even know what the words meant. She thought she knew *shook*, but she wasn't positive. *But foil?* Yet she loved the sound of *shining from shook*, liked to say this aloud

She felt then, within her abdomen, a downward draw and pull, a signal that soon, before nightfall she would begin to bleed. Reflexively, she crossed herself. She shut her eyes and whispered a prayer,

words of relief more than of faith. Although she was careful during the, time she might conceive, putting Henri off with a sequence of subtle signs—a slightly turned head, a shoulder raised—she could never be quite certain, absolutely positive. She did not want to conceive a child during the war, to bring a child into a world where one or both parents might be taken during the night, where a child could be left to freeze or burn, or might be cruelly injured by the planes overhead. The very air above them had been violated. She herself had seen the dirty smudges and the lethal clouds. She was not even sure she would have a child after the war. Sometimes she thought that the weight of the stories that had passed through her house had filled her and squeezed out that part of her that might have borne a child with hope.

She needn't have been so worried this month though, she thought to herself. She counted. It couldn't have been more than four times. Henri was often gone late into the night with the Maquis, and she sometimes thought that the war, and what Henri himself had seen and heard, had affected her husband as well.

*For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim...*

She had tried to imagine England, but she couldn't. Even when the English boys told her stories of home, she could not bring the landscape into focus. And the stories were often confusing. Some were of stone cottages where, in the boys' memories, the gardens always bloomed, even in the winter; and others were of city streets, narrow streets of cobblestones and darkened brick houses.

The sound of bicycles rattled on the gravel drive, startling her. Claire swept the English poetry book onto her lap under the table. Henri and Antoine Chimay entered the kitchen. Each of them was carrying children's school-bags. Henri was breathless.

“Claire.”

“What is it?”

“A plane.”

“A plane?”

“Yes, yes. A fallen plane, in Delahaut.”

“English?”

“American.”

“American? Any Survivors?”

“One is dead. One almost dead. There might be eight others.”

“Where is it?”

“On the Heights. The others are probably in the wood.”

Henri and Antoine lay the schoolbags on the table.

“We need you to hide these,” Antoine said.

Henri looked at his wife as if to say he was sorry. “The barn is best,” he said instead.

Henri was flushed—from the effort of the bicycle ride or his agitation, she couldn't say. He was older than she; he would be thirty-two in the spr. The features of his face seemed to have broadened with age as they oft did in the men of the village. It was as though, in face and body, Henri finally filled out to the shape he would retain as a man throughout his lifetime—stocky like his father, barre-chested, his shoulders round and solid. He had thick brown hair the exact color of his eyes. A V of hair, like a tail feather, fell forward onto his forehead. She had begun to notice that there was a tooth to

one side of his mouth that was darkening. She wondered if it caused him pain; never complained.

"I have to go now," he said. "I don't know when I'll be back."

Claire nodded. She watched as her husband and Antoine left the house and remounted their bicycles. She hid the book of English poetry behind the brick. She put her coat on and lifted the schoolbags into her arms. Upstairs, through the floorboards, Claire thought she could hear the old woman crying.

Darkness between the trees, a false night. It was somebody's birthday in the kitchen. His mother was work in the courthouse, and his father was not yet home with the stink of meat in his skin. A song from somewhere. From the children's faces leaning toward the candles. And Frances, who had made the cake, bent over him so that he could smell her warm breath at his cheek and whispered to him in the din: A wish, Teddy. Make a wish.

When he cried as a boy, it was Frances he went to.

The ground was hard marble. From time to time he heard a distant shout, a call, a branch crackling from a tree. The cold made the branches snap, like fire did.

He had dragged the leg, a dead soldier, how many feet—a hundred? a thousand? No sun to tell him his direction, the compass button smashed. He could be headed into Germany, out of Germany, no signposts on the trees to mark the way.

When he broke his arm, falling from the tree, it was Frances who sat with him, played gin endlessly at his request. Frances who was tall like himself and had his face, but misaligned. His mother sometimes whispered that Frances would never marry.

His lower leg was stiff and swollen. The knee would not bend. He wondered if a kind of rigor had set in.

He would have liked a cigarette. Wasn't that what they gave the dying?

If he wasn't found, he thought, he would die before morning.

Yet he was terrified of being found. An unfamiliar helmet. The muzzle of a gun pressed against the skin under his shin.

On Stella's porch there was a swing. It was last night; or last month, and she sat beside him in a thin cotton dress. Her skin was tanned in the hollow above her breasts, and her legs were bare beneath the skirt. He thought, oddly, of a girl on a bicycle, with bare legs falling, scraping her knees. She was a girl, still, even then on the porch. Was that why he had hesitated? The skirt billowed out like a parachute and hid her legs.

That was his nickname when she was a boy. Teddy, Frances called him that. Stella called him Ted.

His hands had frozen into cups. He dragged himself on his elbows. Inside his flight suit, there was a photograph. He lay back, exhausted. Perhaps he would sleep or had slept. He fumbled with the zipper of the flight suit with his frozen fingers, but they did not work. Inside there was a photograph of Stella.

The sky above the trees was the color of dust. Sometimes there were pallets of oak leaves, and they helped him slide. He wondered, when he heard a distant voice, if he should shout for help. There were procedures. What was the procedure for freezing to death in the wood?

It was 1936 or 1937. He forgot the year. Matt, his younger brother, in a rage, running up to his room, Ted's room (Teddy's room then?), and destroying all the model airplanes, hung on delicate threads from the ceiling, each wooden model laboriously assembled and painted, the models bought with money Ted had earned in the fields, the planes made and collected over many years. From below

Ted heard the sound of rage, feared the worst, then went up into the devastation in his room. Splinter and tangled threads, broken wings on the bed. A thousand hours smashed. He made a vow then never to speak to Matt again, ever, and he hadn't until the morning the train came to take him off to war. He stood on the station platform, shivering with his mother and his father and with Frances, who was weeping openly, wishing the train would come, dreading the goodbyes. Then he turned, said to Frances, I'll be right back.

He sprinted the distance, easy for him, he had won the 440 at the state championships and gone on to college on the strength of his legs. He ran past the farms and the farmhouses, the sun just coming up over the fields at dawn, raced up the steps of his own house, white clapboards with a porch, once a farmhouse, now just a house like the others at the edge of the small Ohio village. He found Matt in bed still.

He shook his hand. He said goodbye.

What was the row about? He couldn't remember now. A silly row. And Matt had been just a kid.

He wondered if he would ever run again. Walk again. Would they take the leg?

Who was *they*?

He had seen the young men with the trousers folded and neatly pinned, passing through, going home. Warnings of what was out there.

But you didn't think of that. You drank gin made from grapefruit juice, 150 proof, and hoped they didn't wake you in the middle of the night while you were still drunk.

Anything to escape the fate of his father. The village butcher. His hands in the entrails of animals. Dead flesh always under his fingernails. The stink of meat never left him. Or did Teddy simply imagine that?

His father drank Seagram's. All night.

Ted came to, realized he had slept. Or had passed out. The pain came in waves. He wished his leg would freeze altogether, go totally numb like his fingers.

Where were Case and Baker and Shulman? Case had a shot-up arm, Shulman had been limping badly. Tripp had had blood on his flight suit. Were they found, lost, dead?

It was a toss-up now between a cigarette and a glass of beer.

The thirst had announced itself suddenly. Not a good sign. He propped himself up on his elbows, looked at his leg. There was blood soaking the leg of his flight suit. He couldn't move his foot or feel it.

Were there cigarettes inside his flight suit? He couldn't remember. They might as well be diamonds in a safe. With Stella's photograph.

Her photograph was like all the others he had seen. Creased, worn at the edges. The creases skimmed across her neck.

Why, on the porch the night before he left, why had he not taken her hand, led her away from her house?

Something in him had hesitated.

Foolish, he thought, lying on the frozen ground, these moral quandaries. Hadn't there been thousands of men making love that night, simply to say they were alive?

He imagined his hand sliding up Stella's bare leg, under the parachute skirt.

Was it possible there were people on the ground when he gave the order to jettison the bomb load? It looked like farmland, endless fields, but the cloud cover was so thick he couldn't really tell, except when he came in low, and saw patches of field. The bombardier said it was just field. There wouldn't be people on frozen fields in December. Couldn't be.

He should have kept one canteen.

~~He drifted, dreamed of parachute silk. He was unwinding a woman and she was smiling, looking at him. He was on his knees, unwinding, but there was so much silk, endless layers ...~~

He came to sharply. He had heard something, he was sure of it. Footsteps. Not in the dream.

He propped himself up, lay perfectly still. The sound was faint, not a crackle, but a soft step. There. He heard it again. Coming toward him from the pasture. He could see no one through the trees.

He looked around quickly, searching for cover. If he could hide, he could see who the footsteps belonged to before revealing himself. There was a tangle of brambles twenty feet away. It was dark enough that he couldn't see inside it. He dragged himself as fast as he dared, not wanting to make any noise. The brambles were hard, thorny. He turned, went in flat on his belly.

No voices. Only one set of footsteps.

Closer now. Definitely closer.

He wondered if he should pray. They joked about it; they called it foxhole religion. Men long out of practice, straining to remember words, fragments, sentences, get it right.

He thought he saw a figure.

The Focke-Wulfs were everywhere. The fight field was exploding, smoking. A B-17, cut in half by flak, the nose spinning, tumbling out of control, the tail floating, drifting as in flight, and in the tail, the gunner was still firing ...

Ekberg screamed. His hands were frozen to the guns. The screaming of the men and the screaming of the plane. The noise, deafening, Vibrating, was in the head, in the bones.

Was it possible, going home across the Channel, nearly out of fuel, to bounce the waves and make it? Peterson had claimed it.

A German had miscalculated the clearance, collided with a bomber. The fighter cartwheeled, plummeted, away from them toward the ground.

FWs at twelve o'clock. Count the parachutes. Where did the gunner's dick go? Parachute silk stained with blood. It was Frances who raised him, and he said goodbye to Matt. He was on his knees now, unwinding a woman, and she was smiling up at him. But there were layers, endless layers ...

When the boy returned to the clearing, there were fewer people, an impending sense that soon the Germans would be there. No one wanted to be near the plane when the Germans discovered it. Jean had gone back to the school for his coat and dinner sack and had come on foot this time, not wanting his bicycle, however well hidden, to be traced to him. If he were caught in the wood, trying to find or help the Americans who had fled the plane, he would be sent away to the camps. He was sure of that.

He slipped into the wood unnoticed, at the point that he had memorized. In the pockets of his jacket, he had hidden bread and cheese and a small bottle he filled with water. The word had gone out that all children were to return to their lessons at once; those who did not would be punished. He could imagine the round red face of Monsieur Dauvin, his teacher, his skin becoming even more blotchy with his fury when he noticed Jean's vacant desk. He had told Marcel to say that he was sick, but he knew such a lie soon would be found out and would probably compound his punishment. He ought to have said nothing to Marcel, for now Marcel, too, would be caned.

He knew the wood well. He doubted any boy in Dela-haut knew it better. His own house, his father's farm, abutted the wood to the north, and even as a very young boy he knew the forest as a safe place to be. Each day after school he walked among the beeches and oaks, observing new growth in the spring, the feathery green buds, the white lilies pushing up from the ground. He fished with Marcel in

the spring and in the summer, and he had respect for the forest in the winter. He knew that a man or a boy lost in the wood in December would die there.

The path was easy to follow, too easy. The body had matted the dead grass, broken small twigs from bushes. He had to find the flyer soon, or the Germans almost certainly would. The path was too exposed, and he had no time now to destroy the traces.

What he would do when he found the man he didn't know. He pictured himself giving the flyer bread and cheese and water, and then leading him to safety. His imagination was suddenly excited as he envisioned helping him to escape to the French border, shaking hands with him like a grown man. But when he thought about this hard, doubts began to cloud his mind. Where could he offer the man shelter? He thought of his own barn, and then felt the hot flush of shame on the back of his neck. At school, some of the older boys had begun to whisper, in his hearing, "le fils du collabo," the son of a collaborator.

He learned about his father at school, when the taunts began, and at first he did not understand. When he asked his father what was meant, his father was silent. He told Jean that a war was a man's business, not a boy's. Later, Jean discovered, by watching and by listening, that his father traded for profit with the Germans, that the Germans ate bread from his father's soil and meat from his father's barn. It was as bad, thought Jean, as selling machine parts or even secrets. What did the product matter? It was one thing to have your animals taken by the Germans, as had happened to many in the village; quite another to sell for money. Sometimes the shame was almost unendurable. He had thought of running away from home, running away from school—but it was winter, and where was he to go? Even if he were to make it to France, which he imagined he could easily do, what then? How would he stay alive? Who would take in an extra boy, another mouth to feed? Mightn't he be spotted by the Germans and sent to the camps? And besides, he couldn't leave his mother. The thought of his mother weeping inevitably ended these reckless reveries.

He had come nearly three hundred meters from the clearing. He knew this part of the wood especially well. Not far from here was a pool that in the summer was filled with trout. It would be frozen now, a sheet of black ice. He wondered where the trout went—deep into the mud? He thought of the comfort and safety there. He had skates when he was younger and used to skate on the black ice at the pond, but he had outgrown them. He knew there would be no more skating for some time.

He stood still in the forest. He thought he heard a sound, a sound unlike any other. The soft brushing of leaves. His stomach clenched. He badly needed to urinate. He should have done it earlier—too late now; he would be heard. He stepped cautiously forward, each footfall as deliberate and as quiet as he could manage. He stopped, listened. He could not hear the swishing sound anymore. He waited. He walked forward about ten meters, and then, unbelievably, the trail seemed to end. Confused, the boy stood near a tangle of bushes. Instinctively, he looked up. Had the man climbed an oak tree? Had he seen him coming? Suddenly he was frightened, and he wanted to protect his head. He should not be here. At the very least, he should have brought Marcel.

The need to relieve himself was urgent. Where had the path gone? He investigated the area where the trail had abruptly ended, searching for its continuation. Perhaps the man had stood up, was walking now. It would be impossible to track footprints in the dim interior light of the forest, Jean thought.

And then, turning in exasperation, he saw what he had come for. The sole of a boot at the end of the brambles.

The village was just outside Cambridge, the land flat for miles, flat and wet, the soil reclaimed from

the sea. All that late fall, since October when he'd arrived, he'd taken a bicycle and ridden the roads and lanes of the countryside, where one could see in the distance, if it was clear, the next village and the next, their steeples rising, an uneventful landscape, a perfect landing field.

They'd taken the village, a massive invasion, farmers' fields now lined precisely with Nissen hut pneumonia tubes, everyone coughing in the night, from smoke or cold, it seemed to matter little. That night, the night before the twelfth mission, he and Case had lain across from each other in their bunk, each propped up on an elbow, each smoking, talking edgily, wondering, speculating, endlessly speculating on the target, the weather, how deep the penetration, how thick the cloud cover. Case was nervous, high-strung. He sometimes boasted of his pitching arm, claimed that before the war he'd been tapped by the Boston Braves, but there was something in the way he said this, the eyes a bit evasive, that made Ted doubt his story. After missions, Case would get debilitating headaches that left him nearly lifeless in his bunk. Ted thought it more difficult for Case than for himself. Less to do as copilot, more time to think about what might be headed their way. Case could not sleep, and that night neither could he. They smoked, and Case talked about his girlfriend back home, and about the Braves. Case never slept before a mission, and Ted had lost his navigator. Ted sometimes thought that if ever they had to bail out over Germany, Case might, with luck, pass for a German—with his high flat brow and his pale, almost colorless hair. In the dark the two men could hear the coughing. One man moaned, cried out in his sleep. Case looked at Ted, said, *Shulman*. The pilot nodded. In the morning, between them on the floor, there was a pile of butts a foot wide.

Earlier that evening, after word had come down about the mission, Ted had gone to look for Mason, the only member of the crew he'd been unable to locate easily. He'd looked in the aeroclub, the post exchange, the mess hall, even the chapel, then given up the search, thinking the navigator would return before the briefing at three A.M.

Each night before a mission, Ted took a shower in the outdoor stall, the water brutal, ice below his feet. It was a ritual, a superstition, a down payment on thinning luck, in the same way that Tripp wore his torn scarf, and McNulty carried a deck of cards with five aces. Returning to the hut, shivering from the icy water and still wet inside his long Johns, Ted heard Case say, within his hearing, almost but not quite taunting him, that Mason had gone to Cambridge. Ted dressed, then got on his bicycle and rode in the winter dark to the hotel where he knew Mason often met his English girl. The pilot's hair froze along the way and melted in the lobby. The man at the front desk deferred to the aviator's wings and, against the rules, let him up the stairs. Ted knocked on the door and opened it. In the bed, a woman was naked. He remembered thin red hair, a mottled color to her skin. There was gin on the table, the real stuff, not GI alcohol. Mason was drunk, but the pilot knew it was fatigue that had brought him to the hotel. They called it fatigue, a gentle name for blowing all your circuits, an inability to get back into your plane when your chances of coming home alive were only one in three. When Mason had heard about the impending mission, he'd left the base. In the hotel room, he told Ted he knew he'd be court-martialed, stripped of his wings, but he added drunkenly from the bed that he didn't give a flying fuck, and then he laughed. Ted began a protest, stopped. You couldn't crew with a navigator who had fatigue, who was drunk.

He'd thought then, superstitiously, *abort*. But he hadn't.

On Christmas Day he had a meal with an English family. He brought chocolate and fruit for the children. There was a girl there, a young girl, no more than twelve, with a round face, and short hair parted at the side, a bowl cut on a face that wasn't pretty but reminded him of Frances. And he had fe

in the small brick cottage, with the gristled joint on the table and gaudy paper decorations hung from lamps and doorways, a pang so deep he'd nearly wept. He'd steadied himself with long swallows of hot tea from a china cup.

There had been no missions since before Christmas, and when there were no missions, there was tedium. They played cards, they went to the pub. They waited for the mail. They walked out to their planes and talked to the mechanics. Sometimes the weather grounded them for days, and the lull made the men touchy. When they went, that early morning, to the briefing, there was a tension in the room Ted hadn't felt so keenly before. He showed his pass to the MP. Later, when he dressed for the mission, he would leave the pass behind, and take only his dog tags and his escape kit with its evasion photo and a handful of foreign currency. And every man on the ship, he knew, would carry something else as well. A lucky coin. A photo of a woman. Cigarettes. A camera. Small paper books that fit inside a pocket and were made of wartime paper that sometimes crumbled, disintegrated in your hands.

The weather would be terrible. They already knew that. Walking from the hut to the briefing room, each man had searched the night sky for a star, the briefest slip of a moon, some ghostly break in the cloud cover. But the dark that early morning was impenetrable. Ted thought that if they went at all, they would have to corkscrew up, break free of the clouds. Forming up was sometimes catastrophic. He knew of planes colliding in the fog, exploding, spinning to earth when they weren't a thousand feet in the air. A lost squadron dragging through another in the thick cloud, the carnage devastating. Senseless death, as if any death made sense.

Case worked a toothpick; Shulman behind him was humming. Glenn Miller. "A String of Pearls." Shulman was from Chicago, a welder, like his father before him, he had said. He had bad skin and small, tense eyes. Mason had been a drummer with a band. He played in dance halls in New York City. Sometimes in the pub, he had entertained them with wooden sticks made from a pointer he'd stolen after a briefing, then whittled and sanded. Watching his hands fly over the barroom tables, you could imagine yourself in a supper club, at a table on the floor, listening to a solo and drinking pink gin with a woman in a red dress, although Ted had never actually done this. In the briefing room, Case was opening packs of gum and methodically putting the dry sticks into his mouth, one by one. His foot was jiggling. Despite the cold, the sweat had started already, tricking down the copilot's temples.

Ted looked at the map, shrouded in the black covering. He wondered how long the thin, red strand of yarn would be this time, where exactly it would lead them. In the room the men were coughing, and you could see your breath.

He remembered the oil-stained concrete below the plane, and the way the dawn announced itself—an almost imperceptible lightening in a field of endless gray. On the hardstand all around him were other planes, other ground crews, bomb loaders, fuel trucks. Beyond that were the barren fields and the trees, and in the distance, the lonely rhythmic chugging of a train.

He let Case take up his parachute pack and flight bag, while Aikins, the ground chief, gave him the 1A. A bolt on the landing gear had been repaired, he read, and he began his visual inspection of the outside of the plane. The B-17, which resembled a piece of hammered metal, had been repaired well enough to fly—but not cosmetically. Countless missions had taken their toll. Paint was scratched to reveal the silver of metal; bullets and shrapnel had left their imprint. The olive paint near the top of the plane was stained with oil from the engines.

At the rear of the plane, the men were putting on their Mae Wests. His crew was young—nineteen

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