

Prologue

THE WAY WE WERE
Paris 1942

Henri

I was eleven in Paris, in 1942, when they took my father away. I decided if Papa were dead they would have buried him here, at the cemetery of Montmartre, with other famous men of France. I'd spent all day looking for his grave, and when I didn't find it I was sure he had to still be alive. But I couldn't bring myself to leave, and I started crying, shivering, because it was so cold. By the end of October, as it was, the foliage had fallen; the wind blew the dried brown leaves across the mounds and stones, across my body. I watched a hard, pointed leaf, looking petrified, make full stops on tiptoe, until it was briskly swept up into the air, then blown so fast through the cemetery I couldn't follow it with my eyes. Papa.

It had been three weeks since Papa was being pushed down the road. I was his only son. My mother and older sister, Jacqueline, had been gone already for six or seven months. They had left early one morning, as was their ritual, for the baths before I had left for school, and were taken with the other women. When my father was taken I was with him, but he had pushed my head down hard when he saw the SS coming, almost knocking me to the ground, the dirt of the road smashing my nose. It smell of horse manure. I didn't want to leave him but before I could lift my head he had disappeared. I was small enough to be able to crawl under and between the crowds of screaming inside the grocery people that were marched away, hiding finally behind the butcher's icebox.

Aunt Monika, I came to call her for a while, she was a German girl wandering through Paris when she glimpsed me crying. On the day I met Monika I was sitting on a grave bench and she sat next to me, lifting her skirt above her knee. "You are alone?" she asked. As I nodded she ran her pointer finger down my cold cheek. Monika told me she was fifteen and had been in Paris for several months. She didn't know exactly how many. She had had some job, she said, but no longer. "I could do things for you if you show me a warm place to stay." Even at my young age I could tell she was one of those girls, a seductress, Papa would say, but I ignored her intentions.

I had on only a shirt and short pants, with Papa's old red wool scarf wound around my neck. He'd not needed his coat the day they took him and so I had it in my rooms, but I had not worn it that day, and I was thinking, If only I could lift myself from the ground and go back I could sleep in the coat. But I couldn't leave.

Monika was alone, her blond hair twisted in braids and pinned to the top of her head, and her watery hazel eyes fixed on me. Her skin was like smooth bleached stone. She too had no coat. A striped dress clung to her body, hugging her breasts, and tight around her hips. White torn-off sleeves from another garment were wrapped around her arms. She wore white pointed shoes that had no heels, but I could tell by their rounded bottoms that they once had been high-heeled. Easter shoes, my mother would have called them. When Monika opened her mouth she spoke first in German, then in perfect French. She had been given a fine education as a girl in Germany, I later learned, and she spoke English as well.

I had lived the past weeks by myself in Papa and Mama's rooms on Rue du Rochechouart. It was a clean and modest apartment. The lavatory was in the hall, but from the kitchen window, over the roofs, you could see the white bell tower of the Sacre-Coeur. Sunday mornings, Mama would have finished her day's work by the time the first calling for Mass rung out. She seemed always to be awake. My mother's sister, Jeanine, and her husband used to live a few blocks away on Rue Requet, above the baker's, with the awning that had always been rolled open to block the sun from his window pastries, and blocked the view of the street from my cousins' window above. Their apartment smelled of hot bread.

A companion would be wonderful, even if she were German, so I allowed my weak loose grip to weave her tiny fingers. When Monika and I reached my rooms I asked her to make me soup from the carrots and cheese that I had. If she could do that for me, I thought, then she could stay. She could, and it was good, and she cleaned my mess, and so we set up house together.

With my reddish hair and blue eyes like my father, I could safely pass as a non-Jew. Monika never spoke of the Jewish situation. She was a Christian, she declared, and this little information was all of her history she would share. From me, she only needed the warmth of my rooms; otherwise, she seemed to move within and about the city with an air of entitlement. My cousin, Bernard, a soldier in the French Army, was thirty-three when the Germans killed him. I would encounter the women of my family sometimes on the street, but they would not speak to me. "Go Hen, go," they whispered to me, hurrying past me. I was not their Jewish cousin anymore. I suppose they tried to protect me this

way, pretending I was a stranger who was living with a German relative. Only two months after Bernard was killed they too were gone.

And so we persisted, for one year, then two, then a third; we walked together through the quiet in-between days of attack, taking careful steps over and around the broken city, and spent nights side by side through the peeling quiet of approaching raids.

PART ONE

1945

Henri

The first January of liberation, our rooms were filled with only the cold. The Germans' disappearance in the previous August, took the black market. This had not turned out to be a good thing. The black market surplus that was once available for us to fill up on was no longer available and prices were so inflated we could not afford anything above the ration. There was no coal to heat us and we could not afford the luxury of burning even sawdust. We cooked our carrots and turnips for our daily soup between noon and one-thirty. We had not enough gas even to heat the coffee of burned barley. Monika and I hoarded the weekly ration of less than half a pound of meat and half a pound of butter and saved it for our Sunday meal. Monika taught me to say grace and to cross my chest, warning me I must always do this. She was adamant about praising the Lord. She told me we were doomed to hell if we did not continually ask for God's blessing. Unfamiliar to me, I was frightened by the power she gave it. I insidiously forfeited the rituals of my parents, of my lost family, what little I remembered. I was happy—without guidance or knowledge of real calendar time, of the holidays, the fasts, the blessing of a new week—to hand my burden to the cross. It was comforting in its magical relief.

The beautiful liberated Paris streets were covered with snow, but as if a flannel throw had been draped over me, I was allowed warmth because of Monika. Through the freezing temperatures her cold cheeks were pink. And when the electricity was turned on

at the lunch hour and our greyish apartment filled with light from our kitchen bulb, I could see the yellow dots in her hazel eyes. She would not admit to being too cold. My skinny body gave me no protection, and Monika knew this. She let me hold her around her shoulders and stand very close to her as she cooked. I was taller at fourteen years than she was at nineteen, and so she was able to lean her head against my chest. When she'd chill, I would feel her shake and I kissed her head.

There was no milk to be had, but I was still considered a child and so was allocated four eggs a week. I gave them to Monika, who drank them raw. She tapped the shell so swiftly and straight that she removed the top half and poured the egg down her throat. I would have gotten ill watching anyone else do such a thing, but I watched her, fascinated as she extended her neck backward and swallowed the yolk in one gulp. She told me her mother taught her to do this as a little girl. This was all she has ever said to me about her mother. When I asked where her parents were, how she had been separated from them, she slapped my cheek and told me it was no concern of mine. With her slap came a draining of all blood from her face. She looked as if a knife were being pressed to her throat. I could only wonder what frightened her so. I was hurt for her but selfishly more hurt for me, as she could not share her secrets with me. I could easily speak of my mother and younger sister, Jacqueline. What was she hiding? When I walked around the three small rooms songs exploded in me. A lace scarf hung like a painting over my parents' bed. Some nights she would get so sad, Monika and I would stand on the mattress, facing each other, and each hold a corner of the fabric with one hand. I would tell her to close her eyes and when she did I rubbed my cheek against the scarf and the visions of those days with my mother, dressing my little sister in the morning before I left for school, the

two rolling dough on the kitchen table, before Shabbos, Jacqueline on her knees on the chair with flour up to her elbows. Papa and Mama would sing Yiddish songs. Papa's voice kept to one or two notes and Mama would sing louder so we wouldn't notice. Jacqueline and I laughed at him, *howled* with laughter, and he would play that he was slapping us, waving his hand back and forth into the air like an orchestra conductor. My sister and I would pretend to tumble to the floor, to our deaths, and roll under the table. Mama would take Papa's hand and together they would walk from the room, closing the light, saying, Poor Henri. Poor Jacqueline. We will miss them. Monika would collapse from laughing with me, and then sob. "Hold me, Henri. Be my Papa." I would smooth her head and want to kiss her.

We did not work very much for wages, because there were no jobs. She sometimes found employment in the theatres as a ticket saleswoman, or cleaning the floors and kitchens of the cafes. On the nights she sold tickets she dressed well: the theatre owners loaned her clothes for the evening. The theatres were the only places in Paris that were crowded with customers, escaping into the silvery life of Mrs. Miniver. On the nights when Monika worked there I waited up for her by our front bedroom window. Sometimes I waited until after dawn for her return. She never fooled me with her excuses. I knew the Americans were with her. All the American journalists thought they had a right to claim our women. After all, the Americans had won the war for us. They had freed us and brought light back to our streets, so now they invaded in droves, all the intellectuals, to take our women. That is how I saw them. I could not blame her for wanting the things they brought for her. The clothes, the clean beautiful underwear that was soft as old table linen—someday I would provide them.