**Souviens-Toi**

**Prologue- 10 Juillet, 2014, 10:20**

70 long, hard years have passed between now and then. And yet it is as if nothing has changed, only myself. Where I used to run and jump, I now shuffle painfully, slowly along the path, leaning heavily on a crude wooden stick that is a little too short. It is lucky I was young on the day they came, for I know only too well the consequences paid for the hundreds who were too small, too old or too terrified to risk it all to save themselves. I dream about them every night, my family, and sometimes think I would prefer to be in their place now, oblivious and unharmed by memories of the day I lost everything. 10 *Juillet* 1944. I remember it well.

Working my way up the road to the square, I pass the school where little Alain had just started attending, and thetram station. Rather than holding ghosts of the past, as I suspected it would, Oradour-sur-Glane still brimmed with the livelihood I remember. In my mind, I could see the Beaulieu children running home, and the baker*,* red faced with heat from the oven, bringing a fresh baguette out to cool. I pause. I am now on the edge of the square, and I know what lies just around the corner. I do not think I can bear anymore and for a split second consider turning around. Yet I know I will never forgive myself if I do not take the opportunity to see, one more time, the setting of my nightmares. I take a deep breath.

It was Louisa who persuaded me to come back and visit. I would never have dared myself, but she insisted on driving me to Oradour, and that was that. Louisa is the only living soul whom I have confided my secret to. The only living soul that I trust with the biggest secret in my heart-I am a survivor. Seeing as nobody knew this, I was not forced to return, a miracle for which I am grateful. But perhaps Louisa is right. It is right for me to visit, difficult, but right, and I know I have to face the past now. I have hidden for too long. It seemed fitting for me to visit on the 70th anniversary of Oradour-sur-Glane, which also happens to be my 82nd birthday, and so here I am.

I’m at the door of the church now. Bracing myself, I shuffle inside. The deep silence of the place unnerves me, so unlike the last time I was here. It is dark and cool, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I take my time looking around, until it is inevitable. I stop and take a long look at the wooden confessionary box, the only item in the whole church left standing. Alain and my other young sibling Eva, were found here by the men. Not blown to bits, it was looking hopeful, until you looked down. Their legs were bloody ribbons-the explosion had not killed them, but the guns had. I know this because their story was in the paper, having been identified by the supposed ‘only’ church survivor, Madame Rouffanche. My mother wasn’t so lucky. She was blown to bits. I look up at the glass window, repaired and restored after being smashed in the explosion. And I remember…

**Chapter 1- Samedi, 10 Juillet 1944: 06:00**

We were 12 that day. Birthdays were big occasions in my family, and so it was usual for us to get up early, even if it was a Saturday. Naturally, the prospect of a weekend birthday made the whole idea a lot more exciting-no school, no homework- and we were free to have a party that very afternoon. All our friends were invited. And so now you see, if you hadn’t before, exactly why I happened to be up at 6am, sharing delicious pain au raisons with my siblings, a birthday treat from the baker whose son was our friend. Our large house on the outskirts of town burst with life, whilst the rest of Oradour slept on.

I was lucky with my presents that year, receiving a beautiful bouquet of roses and a potted plant for our garden, which was flourishing under my newly found green fingers. From mother and father I got a game which I was delighted with, and I decided to keep it aside for the party. They had also bought me a puzzle, an expensive coat dress (which I remember pestering them for upon realising I was the only child in school who did not have one), and a book from my twin sister Juliette, which I had unintentionally also given to her! How we giggled! I was also thrilled to hear that mother had prepared a strawberry tart for our party.

We spent the morning baking buttery biscuits to hand out to our friends with mother, before turning to the serious business of dressing up for the occasion. Alain and Eva were already parading round in Sunday best, and if there was one thing Juliette and I detested, it was being outshone by our younger (and admittedly sweeter) siblings. We wore fresh white dresses, and combed out each other’s curly brown bobs. Looking in the mirror, I can recall feeling very grown up, as we danced around the house, waiting for half past 3, and our friends. It seemed an age before the church bells tolled 1pm, and mother called us for lunch.

Lunch was a serious affair in France at the time, even on schooldays we were sent home at one thirty to eat with our families. You may find it odd then, that Juliette and I detested lunch, and prayed for it to be over so that we could return to school. The reason for this was that lunch was a designated family time, and my sister and I did not like to listen to mother talking about what light conversation she had exchanged with Marie Brissaud next door, nor did we care whether the little ones had learnt to spell their names at school in the morning. Taking all of this into account, I am still grateful now that the soldiers arrived in Oradour during lunch, as I cannot imagine a closer way to enjoy my family’s company before we were taken away. Before they died.

 **Chapter 2- 14.00**

In the middle of lunch was when we first noticed a steady stream of cars driving past our house. It didn’t really bother us, although striking us as a little strange, so we carried on with our meal. Even when Alain pointed out that the tanks filing past were in fact German, none of us bothered to find out what was going on. After all, the year was 1944 and we were living in occupied France, so despite the fact that Oradour was largely a sleepy and insignificant town, it was not unexpected that we may receive German visits from time to time. Besides, our family were too bubbly and excitable to really stop and think about anything for very long. Only Alain seemed to have the trace of a frown on his small mouth.

We had just begun our final course of lemon tart when the village crier, Jean Depierrefiche, strode down our lane, calling us to assemble in the town square for inspection. None of us really took notice of him, as by now even little Alain had forgotten the arrival of the troops earlier, and we were enjoying ourselves immensely. Usually, nobody turned up for town inspection when it was called until about an hour after it was called, and so mother decided we could take the liberty of staying home to finish dinner before departing. Juliette and I were pleased, for we had wasted many an afternoon gathered in the square, freezing our toes off for winter inspection, an occasion for which, as usual, inhabitants of Oradour were somewhat slack in their punctuality. Lunch resumed.

Upon finishing, mother thought we would be able to wash up before leaving, which took a long time on our birthday because Juliette and I were not forced to help. This meant she was left to this chore with only toddlers for company, who seemed to view washing up as some sort of midday bath time. Afterwards, father insisted on polishing our shoes for the inspection. And then Eva wanted to change her dress. Alain wanted to wear his sailor cap which had to be fetched from the attic. Juliette insisted on tidying her hair, so we both went upstairs to do that. It seems odd to me now that we dawdled so much that day, almost as if we all sensed somewhere in the back of our minds something of the horror of what was to follow that dreadful day.

In the mania of our last minute preparations, we still saw enough for our stomachs to flutter uncomfortably. We all saw, from various windows in our house, the sudden swell of our neighbours charging onto the lane and heading for the square. Everyone was looking behind them in a panicked, worried manner. Small children were beginning to cry, and their terrified mothers cast terrified glances around them, before hushing them in a tone that was a little too sharp for comfort. I saw some of my friends, dressed in pinafores and blouses for my party, and they saw me, eyes widening in shock and giving me a look that could only mean *get out!* That’s when I saw the German soldiers bursting into the Brissaud’s house and shoving them out the door. I’m not sure, but I think I saw Monsieur Brissaud sneak down a side alley towards the edge of town. Then the Germans turned and strode purposefully towards our house.

**Chapter 3- 14.00**

We all raced downstairs at the same time, causing congestion on the old narrow stairs that led down directly to the door. Even though it was a swelteringly hot day, I reached for my new coat so that I could show it off to all of my friends. However, we were still out of the house before any Germans could force us out, and, caught up in the crowd, we were whisked along to the square. For a small town, it was surprisingly busy and it was all I could do to keep hold of my younger siblings and try to stay my eyes on my parents. I couldn’t see Juliette-but far from being worried, I knew that she could not have gone anywhere except the square, for that was where the large throng of people were pushing their way to.

Upon arriving in the square, we had to show our identity cards to some important looking soldiers, and were pushed into the centre by their guns pressing on our backs. As people separated and stood with family and friends, I could see clearer and, as I predicted, saw Juliette and mother and father standing together in the corner. I pulled Alain and Eva along as I hurried over. I began to feel very irritable, in part because I was hot in my coat (but too proud to take it off) and also because the party was due to begin in half an hour, and I did not want to be late-after all, it was *my* birthday this time. Not much seemed to be happening, and a feeling of unease had spread over the village.

Soon, the whole village was present and a hush fell over the citizens as they waited for the mayor to give his dismissal. You could almost hear the entire population willing to be sent home. But no dismissal came. Instead, we were left in silence for what seemed an age whilst the German men took their time walking around the groups of people huddled together in the square. I knew the effort it usually took for Alain to stay quiet for 5 seconds, and suddenly realised how frightened he must be to be making no noise for such a length of time. I would usually find it hard enough. I reached a hand out and smoothed his hair, then when he looked up at me I smiled back reassuringly.

This went on for about half an hour minutes, and then the village once more had cause for alarm. The men, my father included, were pushed aside and ordered into 3 smart lines. Unease spread through the people like a plague-what was going on? This was not an ordinary inspection, and nobody knew what would happen next. A flicker of doubt even shadowed the mayor’s face as he too was pressed into a line of men. Desperate mothers clung tightly to their children, and everybody was hoping that they were not the next family member to be estranged. It seems strange, but reflecting upon it, I believe the population of Oradour had never been so close. We were all praying for the safety of our children and loved ones, all unanimous in our concern and dread. Our prayers were never answered though. This was just the beginning.

**Chapter 4- 15:30**

The men were split into groups, 6 of them, all unequal sizes. Through a translator, the Germans explained that they were searching for unlicensed ammunition that they had been tipped off about in Oradour. They told us that the men were needed to help look for it. Naturally, this relaxed us all a little, as we now had an explanation for the soldiers, for the unexpected event of the inspection, and our minds were put at ease. The 6 groups were led away to different starting points for their searching. My father’s group was marched to the Laudy Barn, not far away from the square, and as he left, he turned around and shot us a fleeting confused look that seemed to panic Alain and Eva even further.

Soon, all the women and children were being led away too. Not to a barn, but to the church, with the Germans telling us it was for our safety. As we all crowded in, I remember noting that if it was unsafe for us to be outside with ammunition hidden somewhere, the soldiers had just taken my father away to embark on a potentially dangerous hunt for dangerous objects. About half an hour on, and we heard a loud shot in the air. With the church door bolted firmly shut, we could only assume that somebody had found the ammunition, but our ideas were soon quelled when we heard a multitude of shots ringing out all around us. It was terrifying and none of us could stop thinking about what they were doing to the men. I suppose, deep down, we all knew, but we let our desperate hope take hold of us before we could sink into utter despair.

A little while after the shots had dispersed, the door opened. Small smiles appeared on the faces of the children, and we were all sure that the soldiers would be merciful to us. A young man walked in, carrying a box with long strings trailing behind it, which he placed in the nave, near the choir. He lit the strings, and ran down the aisle, out of the door and had bolted it before any of us had the chance to ask him what was going on. My eyes focused on the little flame flickering, eating up the fraying cords. My thoughts focused on my father. Explosives! I suddenly recognised the box for what it really was, and looked at Juliette in horror. I saw she also had realised our fate. I barely had time to pull Eva firmly towards me when the box went *BANG!* And exploded in a cloud of asphyxiating black smoke. My mother was had been standing next to the box, but she was not any more. I couldn’t see her, could just see blood and gore pooling in the place where she stood. I screamed and joined in the chaos of slowly suffocating children running frantically, seeking refuge. It was a most nightmarish, ghastly sight. I could feel myself getting dizzier by the second.

**Chapter 5- 15:45**

Children were crowded in the space behind the altar, surrounded by a multitude of women, guarding and protecting them. I was one of those children. Weak from smoke inhalation, nobody moved when the first bullets were fired through the window, directed at the wall of mothers on front of me. I saw Marie Brissaud fall to the floor, blood spurting from the gaping wound at the base of her neck. I clung to Juliette and she held on to me. We had lost sight of the little ones. Our human wall of defence was falling fast, and with it some children were dying too, the bullets weaving their way between the gaps in our guard. I silently gave up hope and resigned myself to an early death. On my birthday.

I saw Madame Rouffanche first as she moved to the back of the church. Not taking much notice, and feeling giddy with weakness, I thought not of what she might be doing. Only when I saw her standing on a stool underneath the broken middle window did I understand her intentions. Wordlessly, Juliette and I made to follow her, behind another woman carrying a baby. Madame Rouffanche pulled herself to the window ledge and jumped. The lady with the baby did the same, throwing her baby down first, probably so that Madame Rouffanche could catch it, and then Juliette was over the window too, and it was just me left to gather supernatural strength to escape.

I summoned my courage and hauled myself over the ledge. Pieces of broken glass caught in my hands and pierced my feet. I jumped, just as Juliette was shot in the ankle. She fell and was gunned down before I could go to her aid. Seeing the death of my twin sister gave me a surge of adrenaline, and I began sprinting across the field, looking for shelter. I afforded myself a glance behind. Both the lady and her baby were lying dead on the ground, side by side. Madame Rouffanche was not far away, bleeding profusely from numerous bullet wounds. She was staggering onwards, braving against an onslaught of shots. And then there was Juliette on the ground, but I forced myself to keep running, putting one foot in front of the other. It was the only task I was capable of thinking about.

Once I was a safe distance away from the bullets and the mangled body of my sister, I stopped and took shelter underneath some trees next to the river. Catching my breath, I allowed myself to take in the scene I had left behind me. The town I had once called home was blazing in an all-consuming fire. I could not make out any buildings, not even the church. Everything was so bright, and I could not take my eyes off the dancing flames, however much I wanted to. If it were not for the circumstances, I can imagine that I would have found the scene quite dazzling.

Even from my hiding place, I could feel the heat radiating from the once occupied town of Oradour-sur-Glane. I did not look on in horror, or sadness though, I only felt anger. Angry that we had been tricked. Angry that so many had died in what seemed to be a meaningless attack. Angry that my twin sister’s life was cut short, that all her hopes and dreams were turned to dust. I will also admit I did feel a little angry that I could not enjoy the party I had planned, although that feeling did not surface until later. The smell of burning flesh, sweet and malicious, was carried on the air and I wondered what had happened to the rest of my family. To father, to Alain and Eva. It was the first time I felt guilty that I had not looked for my younger siblings before escaping, but it would not be the last. So I stood, watching my life burn away and collapse in the rubble, with tears running down my cheeks.

**Epilogue- 10 Juillet 2014, 11:00**

By now I am nearing the end of my visit. I have seen the charred remains from the church, seen my name on the list of unidentified victims, lain flowers on the spot where most of my family are buried. There is only one more destination to see, and I am almost there. I take the road on which my house stood to get there. I say stood because there isn’t anything standing their anymore, it was razed to the ground. I reach the spot I’m looking for and find a small plaque, resting where a fence once bordered the road. The message is simple, clear:

‘Ici fut retrouve le corps de Monsieur Poutaraud’

Monsieur Poutaraud was my father. I heard that he escaped from the Laudy barn (how I do not know) along with 5 other men, only to be shot by an officer, and left slumped against the fence, tethered to a stray horse.

I reflect on the time after the massacre. After a few days, hungry and weak, I knew I had to find somewhere to stay. I walked for miles, all alone, until I reached the town of Saint-Junien (it turns out that coat was handy after all). With no serious injuries, and having not been spotted by anyone, not even Madame Rouffanche, who I’m sure saw my sister, I decided it was safer to pretend the cuts on my hands and feet should be explained away as the effect of weeks of homelessness. Sure enough, I found a family who cared and didn’t ask questions, so I settled and told nobody of my lucky escape. The massacre was all over the news, so I found out that Madame Rouffanche had been found alive and, indeed, not seen me climb out of the window, which allayed my growing suspicions and left me free to live with my new family.

Juliette’s body was found, but wrongly identified, which was better because everyone thought we had both perished in the church. Everyone knew that if Juliette had fled, I would have done so too. As for Monsieur Brissaud, whom I saw sneaking down the small lane out of the village, he lived too. In the papers they confirmed 642 deaths. 641, I thought to myself, as I deleted my name from the list with a pencil. So they obviously had not found out about me then. I began to relax into family life again, but I couldn’t bear to return to Oradour, and so I pretended I had never experienced it and I hid from the truth.

Suddenly, standing on the edge of the road I feel I can’t stand it anymore. After 70 years of trying to forget, the memories all flooding back together is too much too bear. I feel nauseous and faint. Just as I am about to fall, I feel a hand supporting me. It is tanned and spotted from age, but firm and reassuring all the same. I turn around to thank the person, and almost faint again from shock. I am staring into the aged face of Robert Hebras, who escaped the Laudy barn with my father but lived to tell the tale. I suppose he must be here for the 70th anniversary also. He asks me if I am ok, before stopping and scrutinising my face intensely. He then politely queries if he knows me from somewhere. I suppose I must have changed a lot since he last saw me, since Robert, like myself, probably sees every face of the dead looking into his dreams.

I am about to tell him that we haven’t met when something makes me stop. I realise that all these years, the reason I have not healed is not because I’m not forgetting enough, but because I need to embrace the past. I have hidden from Oradour, but all I needed was people to share my experiences with. But do I really want to give up my anonymous life? I don’t suppose I would be famous, after all, not nearly enough people know the story of Oradour, and the survivors are not household names. So I decide to give him a clue about my identity, and see if he can piece it together. That way, I’m not ensuring any outcome. I hope that the fact I am standing in front of my father’s plaque, my age, and possibly my face will all complete the jigsaw with the help of my words.

“You might,” I say, “My name is Isabel.”

Emily Webber