

Soldiers

OUR HOUSE WAS AN ORDINARY stone building, neither an elegant spun-sugar chateau nor a dank hovel. The unpainted stucco was the colour of beech bark, warm and severe at once, and the corners of the building were outlined in a pattern of rosy bricks. The window shutters, once green, had faded to grey. Most homes in Mont-Saint-Martin fronted the street, with their gardens, if they had one, in back. Our house resembled the others, but our garden was on the side, behind a low wall in the slow act of falling down.

If you looked at the house from across the road, the front elevation was roughly the shape of an L: a tall red-roofed stack of rooms on the left, like the upright stroke in the L, and a low wing running off to the right, like the L's horizontal stroke. The parlour and kitchen occupied the ground floor, and the two bedrooms were one level up. Below the kitchen was a

small, dank cellar for the fruits and vegetables that Maman had put in glass jars for the winter. A little dusty attic hung between the rafters above Maman's bedroom. The wing on the right held the entrance hall.

I was helping Maman take down something from the attic one day when the door burst open down below and Pierre came running through the house. 'Paris is gone!' he shouted. 'I heard at the café. Paris has fallen today!'

Maman sat down at the top of the ladder. 'Oh, Marcel,' she said to me as if I were a grown-up. 'Now there'll be trouble.'

She didn't even yell at Pierre, who was forbidden to go to the café. Stupid Pierre hadn't even bothered to lie about where he'd heard this awful news. But it didn't seem to matter. That Paris had fallen took all of everyone's attention. And only a few days later, France surrendered to Nazi Germany. We had lost the war.

But nothing changed for a while, until the day that I spent at Maman's heels, playing with tiny extra scraps of dough. I drew pictures in the flour that she sprinkled on the old warped work-table. Maman had set

some sort of a fruit pie on the broad stone edge of the outdoor sink in the kitchen yard. It was cooling and smelling most appetising. Pierre and René came home from their piano lesson and we were playing in the garden.

Maman called, 'Look after yourselves while I go out to see the sick baby over at the seamstress's. And do not go running in the lanes. And do not lie to me about it when I ask you what you have done.' She then strode off with her medicine basket, wearing the wooden clogs some country people still wore then, because the day had been rainy and the roads were rutted with mud.

A fruit pie was a very rare treat then. Perhaps it was a *jour de fête* – a saint's day, a name day – or maybe visitors were planned. Or perhaps it was for Uncle Anton, who was expected any day, but seemed never to arrive. I can't remember. But we began to play a game of soldiers. We played 'Soldiers and Martyrs'. René was a German soldier with a perfectly shaped stick for a rifle. Pierre and I were valiant French soldiers willing to die for France.

You see, we were in the depths of Touraine – the centre of France – isolated in the quiet heartland of

the country. Nevertheless, all we talked about was what was happening in Germany and France. We couldn't get enough of war news. We didn't know how bad it would get, of course. We didn't know about concentration camps, for instance – they hadn't been begun yet. But we knew Jews had been attacked in Germany. Uncle Anton had written to us what he read in the Paris newspapers. Jewish stores had been smashed. We were glad it was so far away – but it wasn't as far away as we'd have liked.

At that time most French Jews lived in the big cities. But, though hardly a common thing in rural France, our little village of Mont-Saint-Martin had its own small population of Jews – maybe ten or fourteen. They stuck together in a villa clawed over with dark vines. Old Madame Sevremont told everyone that a Rabbi from Poland had moved in there, and the rest were his family or his followers. There were occasional comings and goings of friends. They seemed strange and intense to us, because of their dark dress and foreign ways, and because they spoke little or no French. Why the Rabbi had come to Mont-Saint-Martin, I never learned. Perhaps he had some inkling of how bad things were going to get in the cities.

Madame Sevremont knew everything, and told everything. To everyone. ‘The Jews from Poland are here because they had to flee from Poland,’ she said to us once. ‘Times are hard for Jews there, and in Germany. Are you kids going to buy something, or are you just looking?’

‘Why are times hard for Jews?’ asked Pierre.

‘It’s beyond your understanding,’ said Madame Sevremont kindly – she knew Pierre was slow. ‘It’s beyond mine, too,’ she admitted, almost to herself.

That afternoon in our garden perhaps we played being Jews, fighting with wicked German soldiers. Perhaps we did, after we were tired of being valiant French soldiers and dying. Pierre and I found twigs ourselves, and began to parry and feint as if professional swordsmen. René’s gun shot at us several times, but as we refused to fall down dead the gun became a dagger, and we tussled with heroic strength.

‘Well well,’ said a voice into the garden, ‘such imaginative children.’

We paused in our play, breathing hard.

Two German soldiers stood in the passageway at the side of the house, looking over the gate at us.

Two real German soldiers, with grey eyes and

golden hair.

The French spoken by the friendly soldier was funny, but we could understand it. The other soldier didn't look at us. He seemed unwell.

'I am searching for the woman who is a doctor,' said the French-speaking soldier. 'I am told she lives here.'

So the Germans had come to Mont-Saint-Martin. Already!

Pierre adjusted his glasses and said anxiously, 'Well, you see —'

'Whoever told you that?' interrupted René, bounding up to the gate. I think he was terrified. But he was so relieved that the soldier had a friendly voice that he was electrified into action. It was our first German. The soldier was very polite and he reminded us of our father.

'The woman at the pharmacy said we should come here. My companion has become sick and we need some advice.' The other soldier looked as if he might topple over.

'She is not here,' said Pierre, who, while a capable liar when he thought of it, had a tendency to tell the truth to adults, especially to adults who frightened

him.

‘Pierre!’ said René. He elbowed our older brother away from the gate and took up the front position. ‘Our Maman is in Chinon taking care of our sick grandmother,’ said René with conviction. Our grandmother in Chinon had not been in need of our Maman’s attentions for several years, since she was entirely dead.

I said, ‘Very sick, very sick, very very sick grandmother. She throws up every fifteen minutes.’

‘Her eyes roll about in her head like a crazy person,’ said René confidentially. ‘I hope it’s not contagious.’

‘When she throws up, it’s not pretty,’ I said. ‘It looks like –’

‘I see,’ said the German quickly.

Pierre took off his spectacles and polished them on his shirt, speechless.

‘We are very sorry,’ said René. ‘We hope your friend is better soon. But now we must study our lessons. Come on, brothers.’

We raced into our kitchen and appeared immediately at the window, staring ferociously at our soldier. He snapped a military salute and allowed his friend to

slump against his shoulder. He half-walked, half-dragged his friend away.

‘He’s very sick,’ said Pierre.

‘I think he’s very drunk,’ said René, and he was probably right.

The two soldiers disappeared around the bend in the lane.

‘We’d better go out and fasten the gate,’ said René. ‘Quick. No one’s around.’

‘No,’ said Pierre. ‘I’m the oldest and I say NO.’

‘I’m the youngest and I say NO too,’ I said.

‘I’m the middle, and I don’t care what you say,’ said René casually. So with René in the lead, we allowed ourselves to race back into the yard and fasten the gate. Then, in a flurry of excitement, we played our fencing game all the more furiously. Around and around the yard we raced, crushing flowers, lunging and dropping to the ground, yelling like wild animals. When we got tired, we paused to rest, dropping right on the path and sitting there like three exhausted puppies.

‘I think we’d better not tell Maman that the soldiers came,’ said Pierre.

‘Why not?’ said René.

‘She would worry about us if she knew soldiers were around. She has enough worrying.’

‘You worry too much,’ said René. ‘You’re so stiff all the time.’ He tickled Pierre until Pierre’s glasses fell off, and Pierre howled for mercy. I helped with the tickling. I was always on the side of whichever older brother was winning at the moment.

Maman Is Angry

MAMAN CAME HOME an hour later. Miraculously, her trip to the seamstress and back had not taken her within sight of the German column of soldiers, which apparently had veered a bit east of town except for our wandering adventurers. She didn't know what amazements had happened while she was away.

We would not tell her that German soldiers had been looking for her! We would protect her. And this would make our father proud of us, and love us.

But before we could enjoy our own kind natures, Maman launched a conversation.

'Who knocked our pie into the sink?' she cried.

We were struck dumb.

'You worthless, careless children!' she said. 'I go off for a brief errand of mercy and you – look what you do!' She was near tears. The fruit pie was ruined. It had slid into the standing water in the sink! Since the

water was creamy green with slime and the home of numerous grateful bugs, this accident had not done the pie any good. For a while Maman couldn't even speak to us. She sent us to kneel with our faces against the wall of the front hallway, to think about our crimes.

'I want to know who did this!' she demanded. 'And not a word among you to work up some awful lie about this! I will stand here and do the ironing and watch you until the grace of honesty returns to you again! You are French boys and honour means something to you!' Then she heated the iron and pressed the clothes we needed for church. The smell of hot damp cotton filled the high-ceilinged hall in which we suffered together.

We went into the hall and tried to be full of shame. But the devil gets in you at the worst possible moment. For some reason, we fell prey to an attack of giggles. René especially. I remember his thin lips twisting, being bitten in an effort to keep in the bubbling giggles. 'Hush,' said Pierre, mortified, but René was hysterical, and hysteria is contagious. I tried to count the vases and jugs stored on the high shelf, to keep myself from giggling.

Here we had had the most serious adventure of our lives that afternoon! We had been visited by German soldiers, and had smartly sent them away, and our wild mother didn't even know enough to be grateful to us! And we were not going to tell her, either.

But how *did* the pie fall into the outdoor sink?

To this day I don't know.

Many years have passed. Until Pierre died of cancer a few years ago, we would meet every five or six years, as many of the family as could. Our younger sisters Celeste and Agathe (who were born after the war), and René and his wife, and Pierre, and me and my wife and our Monique. After a few cognacs and a good cigar (among the men), we always began to talk about our childhood in France. Sooner or later the tale would be told of our first encounter with the German army. And around we would come to the question of who had bumped the pie into the sink.

'You did,' René would accuse Pierre. 'You were so nearsighted! And fiddling with your spectacles that day.'

'I never did!' he always said, and turned to me. 'It was you, Marcel! *You* were the clumsy one! *You* spilled the milk on the road, you fell out of that tree,

you tipped the pie into the sink. You were hopelessly unbalanced in every limb. You were so fat then, a little ball of butter.'

'It must've been René,' I would answer. 'It was he who was playing the marauding Hun. Remember, René? Brandishing that stick and darting about like one of the Three Musketeers with a bumblebee in your trousers.'

But we never can know for certain.

'You're still lying!' we would say to each other. 'You always were a good liar! You can tell the truth now, Maman is dead and won't punish us for it any more!'

But none of us would ever confess.

What were we to do, kneeling there at the ages of eight, ten, and twelve, our knees hurting more horribly with every passing second? We went from shivery hysteria to righteous anger. Here we had bravely turned the entire German army from our mother's gate, and this was the thanks we got!

'I have many clothes to iron,' Maman venomously reminded us. 'And as we have nothing to eat tonight it won't bother me to work until dark.'

Since we were forbidden to talk to each other, I didn't yet know that not one of us *remembered*

knocking the pie over. We all thought that one of us *was* holding out, waiting for a brother to confess and take the blame. But, I thought, why should *I* suffer the punishment if René or Pierre had actually done the crime? They *always* blamed me, just because I was the youngest. The filthy cheats.

I become stoical, an eight-year-old figure of stone. I would kneel there until I died. I had my pride. I hadn't spoiled the pie.

I didn't *think* I had.

We must have impressed Maman with our rigidity. She gave up that tactic, and one by one called us into the parlour. One by one we were questioned about our afternoon. We didn't know what each other would say. But honour required that we suffer in silence. None of us mentioned the Germans. None of us confessed to pie-smashing.

But when René was in the room with Maman – the Grand Inquisitor – I whispered to Pierre, 'I didn't do it, did you?'

'I didn't, and René said he didn't either!' said Pierre. Pierre was crying. Perhaps, four years older than I, he understood just a bit better what it meant that the Germans had arrived. I didn't quite get it yet.

When it was growing dark – which means quite late in the evening, for this was June and the days stay light forever – I finally had had enough. I had begun to feel rage at Maman for making Pierre cry. I began to sob and said, ‘I confess! I did it!’

I don’t remember my punishment. As we snuggled together in our one big bed that night, however, my brothers gave me the supreme compliment. If I really *hadn’t* been the culprit, then my lie was the best one of the day. Better even than René’s deft lie about a sick grandmother in Chinon. I worried myself to sleep, grateful for the honour, wishing our father was home with us in these hard times. Maman would not be so strict if our father were around. He was strict enough for both of them.

I thought about him, off working somewhere. In the strange, illogical way that feelings have, I began to hate him a little bit for not staying here with us. Even though he was working to feed us. He misses us as much as we miss him, I told myself firmly. But I wasn’t sure if that was true.

By the time we awoke the next morning and joined Maman for a few moments of prayer, the news had reached her. ‘My boys,’ she said quickly, ‘the Ger-

mans have arrived in Mont-Saint-Martin. Now the time for silliness and laziness is over.' She lectured us for an hour on staying out of trouble. Keeping our mouths closed when any soldiers were around. Not wandering off. Not disobeying. 'Your father would want you to be more brave and obedient than ever,' she told us. 'I know he would.'