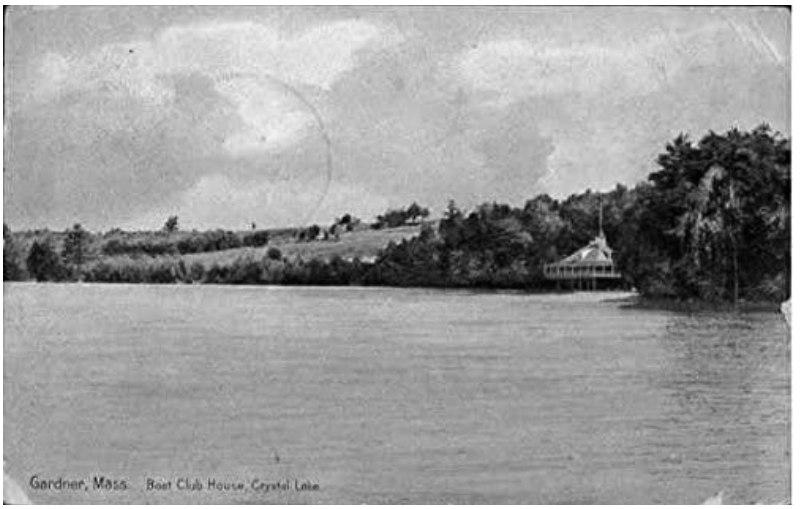
Crystal Lake



For mom and dad

GEORGE JOHN BLACK

PROLOGUE

My earliest memory of Crystal Lake is riding my bike along the narrow, tree-lined lanes that meandered along the water's edge as my father sat on the rear bumper of our Volkswagen's open hatchback, legs crossed, leaning against his cane, watching me and at once looking out across the lake with that thousand-yard stare.

As a child, I didn't think too much about it. I was more focused on my bike. But as I grew older, I began to wonder, *what was my father thinking about?*

After I rode for an hour or so, we'd typically walk side by side down one of those lanes, kicking the acorns that had fallen from the oak trees, until we came to an open space near the lakeshore. There, we pulled out our baseball gloves from the knapsack that my father carried, separate forty feet or so, and have a game of catch. This continued for thirty minutes or more until Dad announced it was time to go home for dinner.

We repeated this routine at least once a week for many years until I outgrew that open space. We then moved to the baseball field of the local community college, where I'd more space to run under Dad's long fly balls.

But even then, we returned to those tree-lined lanes a few times every year, no longer to ride my bike or play catch, but instead to sit together on a wooden bench overlooking the lake.

Always the same bench.

There, I began to know my father. The stories he told were enthralling, even for a young teenager who was struggling to find his own path.

As I grew up and moved away to different cities, states, and countries, I would almost always return summers to see my Dad. We'd take a drive out to Crystal Lake and sit together on that same bench. Sometimes

we talked only about the Red Sox. But sometimes it was deeper. He was my rock. And no matter what I threw at him, he never flinched. His answers were not always what I wanted to hear, but they were always what I needed to hear.

I returned to Crystal Lake a few months ago with my wife and children, proud to show them my father's engraved name upon his favorite bench. He had passed away the week before.

At that moment, I stood with my family and fully understood what that bench had truly meant to my father. There, he had shared with me his life's story, our family's history, and above all else, he had expressed his love for me, in his own stoic way. And now, I was passing on that history to my own children.

They stared at me, not quite sure why I was tearing up.

But it was simple: I'd come full circle.

If I've learned anything in my life, it's a lesson that my father taught me early on: If you get knocked down, get right back up, and keep moving forward.

Always forward.

He always liked that saying by Satchel Paige: *Don't look back because something might be gaining on you.*

I've tried to pass on that philosophy to my own children, probably with mixed results. When you're a child, you don't really understand it. You just reply, "Yeah, whatever, Dad." But when life knocks you down for the first time, then you begin to understand. You either heed the advice and keep moving forward, or you don't, choosing instead to always look over your shoulder, filled with regret.

Did my father have regrets?

Undoubtedly.

We all do.

But did those regrets define him?

Have my regrets defined me?

Only now am I beginning to answer these questions.

PART ONE

LEAVING HOME: *FROM NORMANDY TO AFRICA*

CHAPTER ONE

George was determined to calmly listen to his mother without firing back. After all, she had raised him to be respectful and polite, although sometimes it could be difficult.

"You should at least wait until you're drafted, Jimmy," she said, her voice cracking with emotion. "You'll leave me all alone in this big house."

Jimmy was George's middle name, used by his mother to avoid confusion with his father. For generations, since the family had first arrived in America from Yorkshire, England, first born sons had been named George.

"Enlist?" pressed his mother. "Why the rush?"

George looked past his mother, out the bedroom window of the family's eighteenth century, ten room farmhouse, and across their expansive front yard. He could see Crystal Lake between the trees. "You'll be fine, Mom," he dismissed her concerns. "Anyways, there's nothing for me here. No work. No future."

"The factories are coming back," said Elizabeth to her tall, gangly nineteen-year-old son. "Heywood Wakefield is reopening the two buildings that were closed five years ago," she continued, referring to the small town's main employer, a textile mill that now making military uniforms as part of the war effort.

"You can't expect me to spend my life working in a factory, mom," replied George, his back now turned toward his mother as he continued to organize his duffle bag.

"You don't have to, Jimmy. Your father never did. He found other ways." She was now pleading.

George abruptly turned around. "I'm not my father, Mom! He never worked a regular job in his life."

As soon as he had said it, he regretted it. His mother didn't deserve that.

"Do not talk about your father like that, George! God rest his soul," scolded his mother. "He did his best."

George knew it was a losing game to continue the conversation. His mother would never understand. He needed to get out, before it was too late. Before he found himself growing old in the same small town where his father had been born and had died only a few months earlier at the age of seventy-eight from colon cancer.

It'd been hard on George growing up with an older father. He couldn't play with his Dad like the other kids. He couldn't enjoy a game of catch in the backyard with him during the summer, or go sledding with him on the nearby hill during the winter.

The family house was located on five acres of land within easy walking distance of Crystal Lake, where George would spend most of his days, standing along the shoreline skipping stones over the lake's calm waters, or borrowing the neighbor's skates in the winter to join a game of ice hockey.

But all the while, his father remained inside the house, usually in his study. A voracious reader, George, the father, could read an entire book in one afternoon. He spoke multiple languages, including Latin and French, which he forced his son to study each day after school.

One of George's clearest memories of his childhood was sitting alone in his father's study, reviewing the day's Latin lesson, as his father watched him through the window while engaged in a conversation outdoors with their neighbor, a rabbi. The two grey-haired, bearded men could talk for hours, passionately debating the ancient translations of the Bible and the Talmud, going back and forth between English, Hebrew, and Latin.

At times, George was in awe of his father. Or maybe just scared of him. But he knew that he always had to do well on his daily Latin quiz—otherwise he wouldn't be allowed outside to run free through the corn fields that surrounded the family house.

As an only child, it could get lonely. But George never thought about it that way. He was happiest when he was alone, especially when riding his bike around town. Sometimes he'd ride through a part of town known as Little Canada, where French-speaking Canadians had settled generations earlier. Other days he'd ride through downtown, past the Napoleon and Acadian clubs. Each section of the little town had its own ethnic flavor, reflecting the town's diversity which had developed at the turn of the century when the textile mills and furniture factories were still booming.

But the Great Depression had ended all that.

Now old men with little hope and thousand-yard stares sat on their porches watching George fly by on his bicycle.

As he grew older, George swore that he would get out—that he would see the world that his father seemed satisfied to only read about in his precious books. That he would belong to something greater than this. And after his father died, the war seemed to provide that opportunity.

But George felt genuinely sorry for his mother, leaving her alone. She had spent many years caring for his ailing father. Although nearly thirty years younger, she still loved him dearly.

Long before he was born, his father had used an inheritance to invest wisely in the stock market, but had then nearly lost it all in the crash of '29. The last ten years had been particularly hard as his health began to fail. He retained just enough of an income from his investments to provide for the family. But it was barely enough. And while he spent most of his days in this study pursuing his passion for academics, George and his mother did all of the chores needed to maintain the old farmhouse.

George knew that his mother respected his father's passion for academics, but also sensed that she still yearned for the more glamorous life that she had once enjoyed in Boston and New York, before they were forced to sell their brownstones and move back to the family estate where George's father had been born during the Civil War.

Despite it all, George would often hear his mother say how much luckier they were than most families. Each Friday, for example, he would accompany his mother to volunteer at the town's small soup kitchen, serving those who had lost nearly everything in the Depression and were now barely able to feed their own children. This made a lasting impression on George.

Despite the hardships that many local families endured, George's mother often said that the small town of Gardner was a good place to grow up. But as he packed his bags and prepared to leave home, he still couldn't wait to get out of the working-class town.

"I'll come back to you, Mom" he said, trying not to react to the tears from her wrinkled eyes. "Anyways, I'll probably never even leave the country."

But as he hugged his mother and wiped her tears, George quietly hoped otherwise. He wanted to see Europe, above all else.

But nothing could prepare George for the shattered world that he was about to encounter.

Despite all the stories that my father told to my sister and I as we were growing up, he rarely spoke about the war. As a teenage boy, I would watch all the documentaries on TV, my favorite being *The World at War*.

But can children really understand?

To them, war is little more than an elaborate video game. I wanted to understand, though. I wanted my father to tell me stories of his time in Europe. But he rarely did.

I knew little about his experiences other than what was revealed by a few medals that I found one day tucked away in my mother's desk drawer. One was a Purple Heart, the other some sort of a medal given to riflemen. It was enough to get a young mind worked up, fascinated by the secret tales of war. I sensed a mystery I wanted to solve.

On one rare occasion when I was perhaps ten, my father inadvertently revealed a bit more than he meant to do. We were sitting together in the den watching John Wayne's *The Longest Day* when my dad suddenly blurted out, "It was nothing like that, for Christ's sake."

It caught me off guard. I wanted to ask him why, but I was afraid.

Then, later that night, I awoke suddenly to the sound of my father yelling. I got up from my bed, opened my bedroom door a crack, and peered down the hallway, past my sister's room, toward my parents' room. They almost always left their door slightly ajar. I could see my father sitting up in his bed as my mother put her arm around him, whispering something into his ear.

The next morning while Mom made our breakfast, I asked her about what I'd heard and seen. Her back was turned to me as she whipped the eggs, but I knew she heard me. A few minutes passed, and I asked again.

"Your father just had a bad dream, Johnny. He's fine," she said finally, though unconvincingly, before turning around to face me. "But don't say anything to him. It's better if he doesn't know that you heard."

"Was he dreaming about the war?" I asked.

My mother remained silent.

CHAPTER 2

Located on the west coast of France in the famous region of Normandy, Cherbourg was one of the first places that the Titanic visited on its fateful maiden journey. Nearly three decades later, it was overrun by the Nazis in the days following the fall of Paris. In June of 1944, it was among the first cities to be liberated by the Allied forces in the weeks following D-Day. As George walked the streets with Yvette, he noted the nineteenth-century Fort du Roule that crowned the summit of the Montagne du Roule, their favorite place in the city from where they were afforded a magnificent view of the sprawling port city below.

They descended the hill and enjoyed perfect afternoons together, riding their bikes beyond the city's limits, past the many checkpoints, to explore the coast of the Cotentin peninsula. It was a beautiful mix of high cliffs and sandy beaches, all seemingly far, far from the warfront. But they were right in the middle of one of history's greatest battles.

The frontlines were little more than an hour to the east. A few times they ventured too far, wanting to see more of the rugged cliffs and the rustic moorlands. Each time they were stopped by military police and told to turn around. Going any farther wasn't safe, as small pockets of German resistance still remained on the peninsula's northwest tip.

"Allons un peu plus loin, George. Je pense que c'est sûr," said Yvette to George. She was always the more daring one.

"No, I think we should turn around," replied George, looking over his shoulder at the guards who were still watching them.

Yvette giggled. "Pourquoi parles-tu parfois anglais avec moi?"

Her smile always had a way of lightening the mood.

"I sometimes speak English with you because your English is better than my French. Ai-je raison?" asked George.

"Tres vrai. Tres vrai." She took his hand, and together they walked back toward town

They'd met only a few months earlier at one of the US Army's training bases near Woolacombe Beach in Devonshire, a rural county in southwest England that had an uncanny topographical similarity to Normandy. George had arrived in early 1944 from Fort Benning in Georgia, where he had completed his basic training following a short stay at Fort Devens in Massachusetts, not far from his mother's home.

Yvette had been born in Sainte-Marie-du-Mont, a small village about ten kilometers south of Cherbourg along the English Channel and a few kilometers north of Carentan. Her father was a World War I naval veteran turned fisherman who knew the waters of the channel better than most.

As the German Wehrmacht had swept over the peninsula from the east following the fall of Paris, he instructed his oldest son, Luc, to take the family's fishing boat and bring Yvette to England. After arriving in Bournemouth, they contacted one of their father's oldest friends, Jacques, who had become an engineer and married an English woman following the Great War and now lived most of the year in Bournemouth. But unbeknownst to Yvette and Luc's father at the time, Jacque's wife was actually an intelligence officer for the British Army.

Had he known, perhaps things would've been different.

But for the next three years following their escape to England, Yvette and Luc lived with Jacque's family in Bournemouth and gradually became intertwined with the wife's top-secret missions, often asked to use their fishing boat to bring supplies back and forth to the Isle of Wight. With its proximity to German-occupied France, the island hosted English observation stations and transmitters, as well as an RAF radar station at Ventnor.

But as 1944 approached, Jacque and his wife's involvement in something called Operation PLUTO would eventually bring Yvette and Luc back to France.

Pipe-Lines Under The Ocean, or PLUTO, was a British operation but also employed many French engineers, including Jacque, who were familiar with the Normandy region. The plan was to construct undersea oil pipelines beneath the English Channel between the south coast of England and western France, presumably in support of an Allied invasion that everyone knew was imminent. As the operation continued well into 1944, Yvette and Luc became more and more involved, often using their fishing boat as cover for the Army divers working the pipeline below.

In March of 1944, Yvette and Luc were brought to one of the US Army's training bases near Woolacombe Beach in Devonshire. They met with American Army officers tasked with planning one part of what was being called Operation Overlord.

"Vous venez d'une ville appelée Sainte-Marie-du-Mont en Normandie," asked one of the officers in broken French.

Yvette smiled. "It's okay. You can speak English. My brother and I speak a little."

The officer nodded. "We're told that both of you're from Normandy and have been helping with a project on the Isle of Wight."

"Yes," replied Luc. "My sister and I've been living with a friend of our father's in Bournemouth since we were forced to leave our home in 1940."

"Do you want to go back?" asked another officer matter-of-factly.

Yvette and Luc looked at each other. "The invasion?"

Both officers nodded. "Yes, Operation Overlord, and we need translators who are familiar with the area near your home."

"Why the area near our home?" asked Yvette.

The two officers looked at each other, not quite sure of how much they were allowed to reveal.

"Tell us," said Yvette.

"The beach near your town."

"Oui," answered Yvette. "Sainte Marie du Mont beach."

"We're calling it something different," he replied. "Utah. Utah Beach."

Almost immediately, Yvette and her brother joined at least a dozen other young French citizens from Normandy who resettled in Devonshire, each assigned to a different unit of the US Army's 4th Infantry Division.

Luc disliked the arrogance displayed by the majority of the Americans in his unit, but Yvette was attracted to their swagger. But in the weeks that followed, she became drawn instead to a quiet, skinny soldier named George. He was more reserved than many of the other Americans, and he and Yvette had little in common. But as the weeks passed, and March became April, and then May, they became almost inseparable.

The problem was their relationship was forbidden, and their constant interactions with one another had caught the attention of George's unit leader, Sergeant Cummings.

"I see that you speak French," said the sergeant one day, seated at his desk in his tent, as George stood at attention.

"Yes, sir," replied George, "But not very well."

Sergeant Cummings sized him up. "I could easily kick you out of this unit and send you back stateside, you know."

"Yes, sir. I understand," replied George, realizing the sergeant knew about him and Yvette.

But the sergeant seemed to have something else in mind. "How did you learn French? School?"

"Yes, sir. Four years in high school, and my father taught me after school."

The sergeant laughed, lightening the mood. "I know how that is. My father used to hound me after school, too."

"In French, sir?"

"Hell, no! My old man didn't speak anything except military," barked Sergeant Cummings. "I spent my afternoons listening to his stories about the Great War. He fought near here, in the Somme and Verdun. I think I know more about France than just about anyone else here. All those stories. In another month, I expect to be on those same fields where he fought a generation ago."

"Yes, sir," answered George, who had no idea where the sergeant was going with this.

Cummings seemed to stare off into space for a few minutes before continuing. "George, I got a proposition for you."

"Sir?"

"How would you like to be *allowed* to spend time with that pretty little French girl?"

In early June, Yvette and George relocated with their new unit to Southampton, as preparations for the invasion reached a zenith. It was nearly impossible to move through the narrow streets of the shipbuilding town as tens of thousands of troops continued to arrive, doing their best to release the tension in the days leading up to the invasion. Yvette and George had learned that they would not be departing with the first ships, but instead in the days following that first wave.

Years later, George came to understand that this had probably saved his life.

The sergeant had reassigned Yvette to be a translator for a small group of soldiers, including George, all of whom spoke French to varying degrees and who bore the responsibility of establishing contact with the

French underground near Utah Beach. Yvette was the logical choice, given her knowledge of the shoreline. Other soldiers in the small unit also had clear purposes, with demolitions and diversionary tactics. But George had little to offer, other than his attraction to Yvette, which the other men in the unit understandably envied.

But something that the sergeant had said back in Devonshire stuck with George.

"Understand this, private," said Sergeant Cummings before he had dismissed George from his tent, "these translators are critical to the success of this mission. They'll be our eyes and ears after we land on Utah beach, move to secure Cherbourg, and head east to connect with the first Infantry Division at Caen. From there, it's on to Paris, then across the Rhine, and all the way to Berlin. Then we all go home. But it all starts in Normandy." The sergeant stood up from behind his desk and walked over to George. "You keep that lady of yours alive, George, and we all have a better chance of getting home before Christmas. She, and others like her, are the key to us breaking out from Normandy."

On the night of June 5, Yvette and George climbed to the top of Cottington's Hill just outside of Southampton overlooking the docks where the last of the troops and equipment were making their way along the "hards," the cement docks that had been constructed only recently to hasten the loading of the warships, supply ships, and troop carriers that would join a fleet of more than a thousand ships crossing the English Channel to smash into Hitler's Atlantic Wall.

"C'est un spectacle," said Yvette, as she pulled George's arms tight around her."

"Quite the sight."

"Can this be the turning point?" she asked, as her gaze moved west toward the George V dry-dock where she could see the Mulberry Harbours that continued to be constructed, later to be floated across the channel to serve as docks on the beaches of Normandy.

"The Russians are already in Poland and could enter Germany later this year. It's going to be a race to Berlin."

For a moment, Yvette sat quietly before saying, "Mais Berlin semble si loin de la Normandie."

George understood as he squeezed her tighter. "You'll be home soon enough to see your parents."

"Mais qu'en est-il de nous? What if the Army doesn't let you stay with me? What if they make you go across France, all the way to Germany?

"Then I'll come back to you when the war is over," said George, matter-of-factly.

"Promettre?" She looked into his eyes.

"Promise." They kissed.

Just then, a tremendous roar approached them from behind. They stood up and looked to the night sky to see one of the most awe-inspiring sights that either had experienced. Flying at no more than a few hundred feet above the fields of Southampton were hundreds, if not thousands, of British and American warplanes, all headed in one direction: east, across the channel.

It'd begun.

"They must be coming out of Upottery," said George, barely audible over the deafening sounds of the invasion force. "A guy in my unit was stationed there last year. It's where the 101st was training."

"The 101st?" yelled Yvette.

"They're the paratroopers, landing in Normandy ahead of the fleet."

"Son passe, George! Son passe! Viva la France!" exclaimed Yvette, waving her arms as the massive air armada continued to fly overhead. "Viva la France!"

George and Yvette remained on that hill throughout the night, watching as the lights of the ships moved away from the docks and headed

out into the channel. There was little to be said, both knowing that many of the men on those ships would never return, sacrificing themselves on the beaches of Normandy for a higher purpose not likely fully understood by the nineteen-year-olds who formed the tip of the Allied spear.

History would later refer to them as the Greatest Generation, but as two of its children sat atop the hill watching history unfold before them, all they could do was to hold each other tightly and dream of a day when the world would again be at peace.

CHAPTER THREE

In the summer of 1990, I returned home following my graduation from Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, to inform my father I'd joined the Peace Corps and would be leaving for Africa in a few weeks. I expected that he would do his best to talk me out of my decision. And I was ready for it. But his reaction was quite different, and it surprised me.

"You know, Johnny, I left home when I was nineteen. I couldn't wait to get away from my mother," he said, as we chatted on the front lawn of the house, beneath the maple trees.

"You joined the military," I said, remembering his stories.

"Yes, my way out," said Dad. "Just as your way out is to join the Peace Corps and go to Africa."

I looked at my father. He seemed unusually at peace with my announcement. "You never talked much about the war when we were kids," I said, not really expecting a response.

But something was different this time.

"It wasn't something that your mother needed to hear," he said, looking down.

"You never talked to her about it?" I asked, surprised.

"Very little," admitted Dad, sitting down on the front doorstep and resting his cane against the side of the house. "She knew about my injury, of course, but not the details of how it happened." He rubbed his left leg. "I was definitely fortunate to make it back alive. This leg has been a nuisance over the years, but could have been a lot worse."

I was confused. "But you told Andrea and I that you had been shot by a German sniper while in France. Didn't Mom know that?"

"Yes. But it wasn't the real story."

I was stunned. "But why? Why not tell her the truth?"

Dad motioned for me to sit down beside him. "When I first met your mother more than thirty years ago, we had so many obstacles to overcome. She was Catholic. I was Protestant. Both of our mothers were devout in their churches and struggled to accept the other's points of view. I was basically a small-town boy. Your mother, a big-city girl. She was nearly thirty when we met, and I don't believe she had any prior relationships." He paused, seemingly collecting his thoughts, before continuing.

"So I decided it was best not to talk with her about any of my prior relationships. We had enough against us."

I knew a little about my father's life before he met my mother, but he had kept that part of his life mostly a secret from my sister and me.

But didn't our mother at least know about it?

"I don't understand. What does your injury have to do with prior relationships?" I asked. "I know you were married before Mom. But that was after the war. Right?"

We all keep things hidden, tucked away in the deep recesses of our memories. My father was no different.

"You're *choosing* to go the Africa, Johnny," he began. "It may be the right choice, or it may not. Either way, you'll deal with the consequences. But one way or the other, it's likely to be an experience that'll change you, that'll shape the rest of your life. And when you return, you'll share some of those experiences with others. But some, you'll keep inside, if for no other reason than you believe it's the best way forward. I chose to keep things from your mother, because I thought it was the best way for our relationship to move forward."

"But maybe Mom could have handled it."

"Maybe," replied Dad. "But it would've always resurfaced, and I didn't want that. As I said, your mother and I'd enough to overcome. We didn't need to be burdened by the past."

Burdened by the past. What the hell did that mean?

He looked at me. "You're at the beginning of your life, Johnny. I'm sixty-four and in the twilight of mine." My father reached for his cane and put his arm on the front doorstep to give himself some extra leverage as he stood up. "Come on, let's take a drive."

As we drove down the street from our house atop Bickford Hill, turning left onto Lawrence Street and then right onto Cross Street, we passed by Stone Field, where I'd played baseball throughout high school.

At the corner of Cross and Elm Streets sat my elementary school, which had previously been the high school where my father had taught French and Latin for nearly twenty years until his retirement in the mid-seventies.

We then continued on Elm Street until we entered the rotary near the town's museum and turned left onto Central Street. It took us past the local skating rink and Greenwood Swimming Pool, packed with families looking for some reprieve from the summer humidity. Before turning right onto Crystal Lake Drive, my father pointed at his childhood home.

"That was the place I needed to get away from. The Army was nothing more than my way out. On the day I left my mother, I came to this lake and stared out across her calm waters, wondering what life had in store for me. If I'd known, maybe I would've stayed, although eventually I would've been drafted." He paused. "Maybe everything would've been different, maybe not."

Dad parked the car off one of the narrow lanes that ran along the lakefront. As I got out of the car, I looked across the lake and saw the pump station that still provided the town with its water supply. The water was always clear and calm and no different on this day.

Dad and I walked a few hundred feet to his favorite bench and sat. A light breeze lifted my father's cap.

"Before you leave for Africa, Johnny, I want to tell you a story. The story of my time in France."

CHAPTER FOUR

Since 1940, the village of Sainte-Marie-du-Mont had been occupied by nearly one hundred German soldiers who used the local church tower as an observation post to survey the surrounding countryside and coastline. The Germans suspected that the expected invasion would occur near Calais, much farther north where the channel was narrowest.

But in the early hours of June 6, 1944, this small garrison of Axis fighters were undoubtedly surprised to see members of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division slowly descending from the sky. These elite American soldiers were tasked with securing what was called Zone C, immediately inland from Utah Beach, in charge of clearing a route for the tens of thousands of soldiers arriving by sea.

Also looking up into the sky in those early hours of June 6 was Yvette's mother and father, who for more than four years had collaborated with the French underground to disrupt the Germans as they attempted to build their defenses along the coast. While their efforts hadn't succeeded in stopping the completion of the coastal fortifications, they'd been successful in the days leading up to June 6 in destroying many of the bridges and railroad lines leading onto the peninsula, hindering German ability to resupply once the invasion was underway.

But as the Americans descended from the sky, they were completely vulnerable to German machine gun nests. Yvette's mother and father understood the danger and ran from house to house in a call to arms. Any local inhabitant with a gun was expected to engage and distract the enemy, giving the Americans time to land and secure a foothold.

It was shortly before 2 am when the first shots were fired.

The fighting became fierce. Most of the locals were armed only with old rifles and were no match for the Germans. But they held out for as long

as they could, focusing on the area around the church where the majority of the paratroopers planned on landing. The surrounding villages, including the nearby St-Mere-Eglise, had also risen up against the Germans and were waging similar battles.

Yvette's house was only a few blocks from l'Eglise St. Hilaire—the smaller of the two local churches—at the intersection of Rue D'Eglise and Rue de Mont, right in the center of Zone C. The latter ran perpendicular to Sainte Marie de Mont beach—which history would rename Utah Beach—continuing inland to the center of the village at l'Église Notre Dame, where the paratroopers were landing. The former ran horizontally to the beach, and although it was by no means a main road, it was extensively used by the Germans to bring supplies in and out of the village.

The Allied paratroopers were charged with securing these roads and meeting up with the landing forces shortly after dawn as they made their way off the beach. Yvette's father, who had been in continual contact with his old friend, Jacques, knew the Allies' plan and understood that its success depended on the ability of the paratroopers to secure these two roads. If they failed, then the landing forces would be vulnerable, perhaps leading to catastrophe. Yvette's father knew the significance of the moment. Liberation was close at hand, and all hands on deck were needed to ensure its success.

Crouching behind a stone wall on the edge of his property with a view of the church, he glanced back toward his house and motioned for his wife to descend into their cellar. On the other side of Rue de Mont he could see three of his neighbors taking up similar positions behind walls and barns. From the center of the village, near Eglise Notre Dame, emanated the relentless sound of gunfire as the paratroopers continued to land. Yvette's father could only hope that his fellow villagers were able to provide enough cover for the majority of the brave liberators to land safely.

Nearly an hour after the first paratrooper had landed, the gunfire grew louder, and Yvette's father knew that the battle was moving in his direction. Soon he could hear men yelling in German.

Were they retreating or fighting their way to the beach?

He listened, hoping to hear English, proof that the paratroopers had landed successfully and had moved into position to cut off the Germans. He cocked his rifle and prepared himself for the engagement, signaling to his neighbors to do the same.

But just then, the early morning skies were lit up like a noon-time sun. Yvette's father covered his eyes, temporarily blinded by the flashes. He had been told to expect this. Tracer fire to warn the resisters. The battleships had arrived offshore, preparing to begin their bombardment of the coastline in advance of the beach landings.

It was just before 5 am on June 6, 1944, when the massive guns opened fire. The onslaught continued for nearly an hour.

When it was over, little remained of the coastal towns.

CHAPTER FIVE

Yvette and George crossed the English Channel on June 8 aboard the USS *Bayfield* along with more than a thousand other troops and support personnel. The five-hundred-foot war vessel had already made four crossings since the June 6 landings, continuing to follow the same route each time.

After leaving Southampton, it joined a larger flotilla about thirty kilometers southeast of the Isle of Wight. From there, the ships broke up into five convoys heading for the different landing beaches.

On this day, the *Bayfield* headed toward Utah Beach.

The crossing took about three hours. The waters of the channel were choppy but calm compared to the harsh conditions that the first wave of the invasion force had endured a few days earlier. Nevertheless, George and Yvette still held tightly to the guard rail as they stood on the main deck of Bayfield's starboard side.

"Qu'est-ce que tu crois qu'on va trouver là-bas, George?" asked Yvette.

George knew how worried she was about her father and mother. Had they survived the battle for the beachhead? George had his doubts, but he did his best to reassure her, nonetheless. "Je suis sûr qu'ils vont bien. They know the area well. They would've found a place to hide."

But Yvette knew her father would never have hid. He would've been right in the middle of the battle.

The *Bayfield* set anchor about a kilometer offshore. George, Yvette, and the other members of their small unit waited their turn to climb down the ropes into the Higgins boats to take them ashore. In the coming days, most troops crossed the channel aboard troop transports that then docked

with the giant Mulberry harbors that George and Yvette had seen being readied at Southampton. But they'd yet to be floated across the channel.

"Es tu effrayé?" smiled George, trying to lighten the mood as they and the other members of their unit prepared to descend the rope ladder.

Yvette shook her head, but her expression said something different.

Once they were in the Higgins boat, they began the short trip to the beach. With so many other small boats headed in the same direction, the waters became even choppier, causing many of the passengers to vomit uncontrollably. George could see that Yvette was covering her mouth.

About fifteen minutes later their boat arrived ashore, lowered its ramp, and gave them their first clear view of Utah Beach.

It was almost unrecognizable to Yvette, who had spent much of her youth playing on the sandy beach. Unlike Omaha Beach to the east, which had sheer cliffs and narrow beaches, Utah was made up of sandy dunes filled with hare's tail grass and sea holly, which gave way to beautiful tidal wetlands.

But now those pristine dunes had been flattened and transformed into a giant command post of hastily erected tents along sandy roads filled with half-tracks and tanks moving inland. An endless stream of soldiers flowed ashore, passing the bombed-out remains of the German gun emplacements. One of George's unit members flagged down a passing jeep that was headed in their general direction. At first, the driver hesitated, but then he saw Yvette.

"Jump in," he said. "The lady can ride in front with me."

George sat immediately behind Yvette and kept his hand on her shoulder as they passed over the dunes and entered the tidal wetlands, which extended for nearly a kilometer inland. During high tide, they could only be traversed along the few roads that the paratroopers had been tasked to keep open.

On this day, some of the tanks and half-tracks coming up from the beach had assumed that the current low tide would allow them to move off the roads. They had been mistaken, and dozens had become mired in the quicksand-like conditions as George and Yvette's jeep passed them by.

Continuing to move inland, Yvette kept an eye out for any familiar signs of her childhood home.

But few could be found.

As a child, she often rode her bike along Les Granchettes, bordered on either side by eight-foot-tall hedgerows, until she came to the Bay of Veys. On some days, she turned left and pedaled toward the beach, and on other days she turned right and rode along the edge of the Canal de Carentan a la Mer, before circling back home along the Douve River.

Along the way she passed by manor houses, farms, and castles. One of her favorite places to stop was the Sainte-Marie-du-Mont manor with its hipped slate roof, expansive gardens, and friendly jardinier, who would always let her refill her thermos with rainwater from the cistern. Nothing seemed familiar now. It was all gone. All in ruins. As their jeep moved slowly down the street, Yvette squeezed George's hand and pointed in the direction of bombed-out building shells just ahead.

"Est-ce l'église?" asked George, knowing that Yvette's house was near one of the town's oldest churches.

"Oui." Yvette's response was barely audible

"You can drop us off over there," said George to the driver.

"Why?" he answered incredulously. "Nothing here. This whole area was leveled by the naval barrage just before the landings began."

"It's okay. This is where we need to be," said George.

As they climbed out of the jeep, George and the other members of the unit surveyed the surrounding area.

The driver was right. Not much left.

It was apparent that the Navy had indeed targeted the area with a heavy bombardment from their sixteen-inch guns in an attempt to destroy the German gun emplacements scattered along the coastline near Saint Marie du Mont. In those early hours of June 6, a heavy fog layer over the area had made it nearly impossible for the shelling to be accurate. Some of the shells had found their mark, but most had gone astray, landing on nearby buildings, including L'eglise St. Hilaire near Yvette's home.

"Maybe they got out in time," said George, doing his best to console her.

"Non, ils étaient là. Mes parents étaient ici," she replied sharply, sifting through the ruins of her childhood neighborhood. "Je veux voir leurs corps."

George glanced at the other members of the unit.

They all shrugged.

"Maybe a mass grave?" whispered one, trying not to let Yvette overhear.

George shook his head. *Now what?*

"We need to get to Cherbourg," said the unit's leader, a corporal not much older than George. "That's our mission. Nothing we can do here."

Yvette glared at him. "Baise toi. This is *my* mission. Ma famille."

"With all due respect. It's not," countered the corporal. "Your job is to translate for us and help us make contact with the Resistance near Cherbourg."

But Yvette waved her hand dismissively and walked away, and George had no choice but to follow.

"Let her go!" yelled the corporal to George. "We have to get to Cherbourg."

But George kept after Yvette.

CHAPTER SIX

The Allied commanders in charge of developing the plans for the invasion of Europe understood that one of the keys to its success would be their ability to secure deep-water ports. This would allow reinforcements and supplies to be brought directly from the United States.

Cherbourg, at the tip of the Cotentin peninsula, was an essential capture.

But to land forces near the port on June 6 would've made it too easy for the Germans to cut off the peninsula, trapping the Allies. So it was decided to secure the beachheads along the Normandy coast first; link up the five main invasion forces that had landed at Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, and Sword Beaches; and then move to take Cherbourg before the end of June.

But in the hours and days following the landings, that plan seemed in jeopardy.

Although the landing forces on Utah experienced little resistance, as soon as they'd moved inland to link up with the airborne forces that had fought their way out of St. Marie du Mont and St. Mere Eglise, the fighting had become much more intense, especially around Carentan.

The Navy's efforts to destroy the majority of the German garrisons on the morning of June 6 had failed, although Resistance fighters had fought bravely alongside the paratroopers in an effort to secure the roads moving inland from Utah. Vicious house-to-house fighting continued for days until the Allies got the upper hand and took the towns between the beach and Carentan.

The Germans counterattacked near the Douvre River, but were unable to maintain the offensive when supplies couldn't get through,

forcing the German commanders to abandon the eastern peninsula and turning their efforts to holding Cherbourg to the west and Caen to the east.

The mission of George and Yvette's small unit, along with dozens of other similar units, involved rounding up Resistance fighters from across the eastern peninsula and following behind the Allied forces advancing toward Cherbourg.

Once these forces had cleared the German garrisons surrounding the city, the specialized units and the local fighters would move in, establish contact with Resistance fighters laying low within the city, and work together to drive out the remaining German forces, in hopes of avoiding the bloody, house-to-house combat that was seen in Carentan.

But as Yvette continued to search for her parents in the ruins of Saint Marie du Mont, it became uncertain whether she could continue the mission.

The other unit members were growing impatient and had threatened to inform the regiment commanders of the situation.

George was stuck in the middle.

He understood his role, as Sgt. Cummings back in England had laid out for him. He had no particular expertise. He was no saboteur. Neither was he a particularly good marksman. But what he was, was the boyfriend.

Perhaps the sergeant had known what would happen when Yvette returned home. Perhaps he knew that she would lose sight of the overall mission. So George understood now that his role comprised keeping her focused on the reason she had been sent back to France after more than four years in England.

"I don't care about Cherbourg, George. I never did. I wanted to come home. That's all. But now look at it. Tout est détruit," she said, wiping away the tears as she continued sifting through the ruins of her childhood neighborhood, quickly losing hope that she'd ever find her parents.

George sat down on the remains of a stone wall that had once surrounded L'eglise St. Hilaire and motioned for Yvette to join him.

Reluctantly, she did.

"I know how difficult this is," began George, reaching out to put his hand on Yvette's leg. But she pushed it away.

"No, tu ne comprends pas. None of you do," she said. "You don't know anything about this place. This is my home. I grew up here. Went to school just down the street. That's where I learned to speak English." She looked off at the ruins in the distance. "I used to go to this church with my parents and brother every Sunday, sometimes volunteering to help clean up the grounds." She paused. "How would you feel if your home had been destroyed and your parents probably killed?"

George thought about his mother, the house he had grown up in, and about Crystal Lake, something he hadn't often done since arriving in Europe six months earlier. He had wanted so much to get away from his mother, and from the memory of his father. But mostly he had wanted to stand on his own two feet.

But as he sat next to Yvette on that stone fence, it all seemed so surreal. Less than a year earlier he had graduated from high school and had only turned nineteen a few weeks ago. He hadn't thought too much about what would happen after the war. But as he watched the tears falling from Yvette's eyes, he knew that he wanted to be with her.

"This will all be over someday, Yvette—"

Yvette cut him off. "And what, George? Then we can be together? Do you really think that's possible? After Cherbourg, you'll move on with your regiment across France, and I'll be left here to pick up the pieces."

"I told you, I'll come back for you. This war will be over in a year, maybe earlier. I'll be back."

"Back to what?" replied Yvette, incredulously. "Look around. It's all gone."

"Then you'll come to America with me."

She stood up. "You don't understand, do you? *This* is my home."

"And we're fighting for it. We're here to liberate all of you."

She laughed. "Liberate! So now you're saviors" she said incredulously. "You didn't even know anything about my home before this war began. Don't pretend you care. All of you just want to win the war and go home. We'll be left here to rebuild our lives."

"That's not fair, Yvette. I *do* care. I care about *you*."

"That's my point. If you really care about me, then you'd understand how I feel. This place is who I am."

"But it doesn't matter where we are, so long as we're together."

"No, ça compte. Home is all that matters. You're running away from yours, right?" Her gaze was sharp. "It's why you joined this war. But anyone who runs away from their home, is lost."

And then she walked away.

My father paused in telling his story and stared out across Crystal Lake as we sat together on the bench beneath an old maple tree. I could tell that it was difficult for him to share all of this with me.

But at that moment, I felt closer to my father than I ever had before.

He was sharing a part of himself that had been long buried, and he had chosen this moment to open up. Maybe it was my pending departure with the Peace Corps to Africa, or perhaps not. But whatever the reason, I was hearing a story that had been long hidden, but never forgotten. A part of me felt that he was telling me just for that reason, so that it would never be forgotten.

"I've thought about her words a lot over the years. It was hard to hear, but she was right," said my father, nodding. "I'd run away from home

looking for myself. But until I came to terms with the way that I'd been raised by my mother and father, I would always be lost."

He turned to me. "It took another twenty years after the war ended before I really made peace with my mother, and unfortunately it was toward the end of her life. It wasn't that she had ever done anything wrong. But when you're raised by two strong-willed people who have a very fixed way of looking at things, it's hard to find your own space. My mother's focus was always caring for my father, because he was so much older. It's not that she forgot about me. But I often felt that I was in third place in her heart. First came my father, then her church, then me. I realize now that she found comfort and purpose in her faith, and I regret not understanding that sooner. And trying to raise a child and care for an older, sick man was made ten times harder by the reality of the Depression. So I turned inward and learned to do things myself. It was the start of that fierce independence that drove me away from home and into the Army."

"Did your mother ever understand why you left?" I asked, not really sure what to say to my father.

"Oh, I think she understood right away but was never able to tell me. And that's why I'm telling you all of this, Johnny, now, before you leave."

My dad put his hand on my leg.

"It's ironic that we hate certain things about our parents, but then when we become parents ourselves, we do things in the same way as they'd done. It doesn't make much sense, but you see it over and over again. And I guess I've been no different. But I've always loved you and your sister very much, perhaps more than either of you could ever understand."

For one of the few times in my young life, I saw my father's eyes begin to water. Then he composed himself and continued. "But in many ways, my approach with the two of you has been very similar to how I was raised by my parents. Probably too strict. And now you're leaving for very much the same reason why I left home before the war."

I was speechless. I sat there with my father on that bench, the same bench that we would share many times over the next thirty years, hearing a confession of sorts. I was too young to really understand the entire matter of what he was saying. But it stuck with me, and was a small piece to a much larger puzzle that I would continue putting together for many years.

My dad continued. "Anyways, you go to Africa, Johnny. I can't say I want you to, but I do understand it. I hope someday, perhaps while I'm still alive, you'll come to understand what Yvette said to me that day. Anyone who runs away from home is lost, until they're able to confront the reason why they run."

Unfortunately, it would take me many, many years to arrive at that understanding.